



# Enhancing Sport Tourism in Heraklion, Crete

## Case study of Pankritio Stadium

Sofia Kokolaki

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**Kokolaki, Sofia**

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**Abstract**

Heraklion city is located on the biggest Greek island, Crete. Its economy is mainly based on tourism's entire ecosystem including the people, businesses and services. Therefore, sport tourism as a fast-developing sector of tourism is of high value.

The aim of the present research study was to investigate the existing state of sport tourism in Heraklion with a special focus on Pankritio Stadium since it is the biggest sports facility in Crete island region. By focusing on the management actors this study aimed at determining the areas that need improvement for future sport tourism development to be feasible. Island tourism and island sport tourism hinders some challenges compared to mainland destinations, regarding the logistics of travelling, the services the general among other things.

For this study qualitative research framework was chosen and six semi-structured interviews took place in Greek language in person at each participant's' workplace. The interviewees stakeholders from Heraklion municipality were purposefully selected, based on their role in sports tourism industry. The interviews were recorded on the mobile phone. The data was coded and categorized afterwards into themes that occurred from the research questions and the theoretical framework. The data also provided information on shared or different views of the different stakeholders.

The results showed that at a local level, tourism stakeholders promote the sport tourism without a concrete strategic plan among the Ministry of Sports, the Region of Crete Administration and the Heraklion city municipality. The main obstacle for future development seems to be the promised funding from the government which is needed to build and maintain the facilities and the technical infrastructure of Pankritio Stadium at a competitive level.

The data from this research provides information on the importance of sport tourism for Heraklion city and the infrastructure development needs which will lead to sport tourism flourishing in the city.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Sport tourism, Crete Island, Heraklion, Pankritio Stadium

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# 1 Introduction

There are plenty of definitions in previously published literature, explaining the meaning and the important contribution of tourism to every country around the world. Mathieson's & Wall (1982) give a definition of tourism, as one's travelling to a destination other than their own place of stay or place of work and the provision of facilities created to cover for the needs arising along the travel (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). Tourism acts in favor of the host community by creating value in its economy (Herbold et al., 2020).

As for sport tourism, it is broadly defined as any type of traveling to another place which is located away of a person's primary residence, to participate in sports related activities for recreation or competition, or to spectate sport events, or to visit sports attractions (Hudson, 2003). The industry of Sport tourism is one of the fastest – growing and lucrative industries. It comprises of the people, the places, the activities and the all the things that have an impact or are impacted by sport tourism (Knott & Swart, 2015).

The combination of sports and tourism has gained increasing growth and attention, as an increasing number of tourists are interested in sport activities during their trip, resulting in tourism industry growth, with the sport tourism industry being one of the fastest- growing industries (World Tourism Organization, 2025). This growth has a positive impact, on the target country's economy and culture (Vrondou, 1998).

For Greece, the importance of sport tourism is high, as the economic development of the country, is mainly based on tourism and its positive impact on gross national product. For the year 2023, according to the latest statistical data report of the Institute of the Association of Greek Tourism Enterprises, the actual contribution of tourism to the Gross National Product of Greece, reached 13% and is estimated at 28.5 billion euros and more than 32.7 million tourists residents of other countries (Ikkoç & Koutsός, 2024). The primary product categories of Greek tourism are "sun & beach", "yachting", "nautical tourism - cruising", "city break" and "cultural and religious tourism" (INSETE, 2021). Sport tourism is not mentioned in these categories, only as complementary tourism product under the category "sports and activities" along with "ecotourism" and "wellness tourism". Crete is considered one of the top Greek destinations for outdoor sport activities and

“Adventure tourism” (horse riding, climbing, cycling, skydiving etc.). It offers the potential to develop sports, due to the natural environment, climate and infrastructure, also due to the capacity of hosting competitions and athlete training events (climate, hotel and sport facilities) and due to the organization of sport events (INSETE, 2021).

Though, sport Tourism gained popularity in recent years (Wang et al., 2021), there is a need for better quality in athletes’ training and sport teams search for a combination of good training conditions and climate in good quality facilities where the athletes can train without injuries. Due to a global increasing interest in sport activities, innovative sport facilities infrastructure and services could attract international tourists to the host country (Mesci et al., 2021).

The research addresses the underdeveloped potential of sports tourism in Heraklion, specifically at Pankritio stadium. The study aims to identify the challenges hindering its growth and uncover the unexplored opportunities and prerequisites for its future development. It is interesting to find out how the Pankritio stadium, which was built for the 2004 Olympic Games to host the football games, can be utilized to attract more sport tourism events.

With the answers given to the research questions, this thesis intends to research the current situation of sport tourism in Heraklion city, Pankritio Stadium. From a hosting destination point of view, the aim is to discover the level of current infrastructure, if it is sufficient to support sport tourism events and the stakeholders’ opinions on what further actions need to be taken to develop sport tourism. Regarding the Stadium, the idea is to research the current level of available sport facilities, the level of events organized, and its impact on the local community. From a management perspective, the aim is to figure out what is the level of collaboration between the local authorities and the Greek government’s Ministry of Sport, to understand the factors that act against the sport tourism marketing and development. This research gives suggestions on what factors need to be improved, to develop sport tourism to its full potential. More specifically, this study identifies how the different stakeholders take initiatives to actively develop sport tourism in Heraklion and the general smooth use of the main multi-sports facilities in Pankritio Stadium.

## 2 Sport tourism

As a continuously progressing field, sport tourism has beneficial impact on several environmental aspects (enhancing new 'green' infrastructure) (Chersulich Tomino et al., 2020), economic and socio-cultural aspects (e.g increased interest in sports and events participation, employment) (Chersulich Tomino et al., 2020) ; (Hemmonsbeay & Tichaawa, 2019). To facilitate the study of sport tourism, some previous researchers have used certain classification models. Gammon & Robinson (1997) name sports tourists who are involved in competitive sports, with either an active or passive behaviour, "Hard" sport tourists. The second distinction is for the sport tourists who are involved mainly with the recreational aspects of sports, naming them "Soft" sport tourists

1. **Sport tourism** includes all the individuals or the teams who participate actively or passively in any kind of sport activities for competition or for recreation purposes while travelling. Participation in a sport activity has main importance for travelling. While tourism as a general experience, has a secondary importance in this case, it can reinforce the overall tourist experience.

**Hard definition** People travel to participate in a competitive sport event actively or passively (ex. as spectators), as the Olympic Games, World Championships etc.

**Soft definition** People travel to participate actively in a recreational / leisure sport event or activity (e.g skiing, hiking, kayaking).

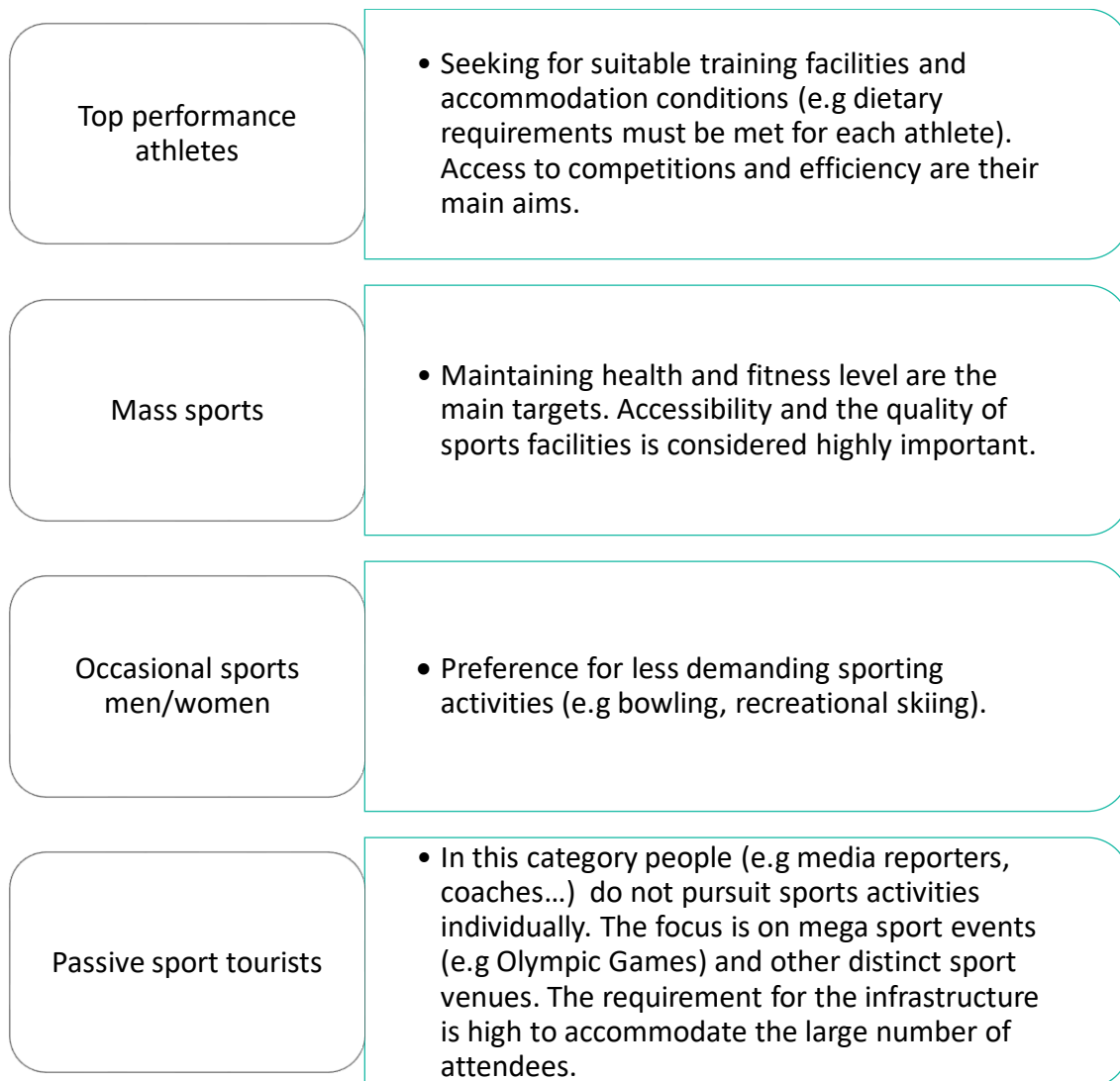
2. **Tourism sport** People travel to a destination primarily for holiday. Their participation, active or passive in an organised sport activity is secondary.

**Hard definition** Competitive or non-competitive participation in sport activity which acts as a secondary motivation for their travel experience (e.g sport cruises).

**Soft definition** Incidental and unplanned competitive or non-competitive participation in sport activity during the holiday (e.g minigolf).

Sports tourists fall into four categories based on their demands (Hinch & Highman, 2004). Those demands require the appropriate resources from the travel destination facilities, as presented and described below.

Figure 1. Sport tourism demand groups and facilities requirements (Hinch & Highman, 2004)



Passive sport tourism enthusiasts travel to a destination to watch sports without necessarily considering the location where the sport event is hosted (Morfoulaki et al., 2023). This type of sport tourists enjoys spectatorship and socializing with other participants during a mega event (e.g FIFA World Cup, UEFA Euro Cup), a major event (e.g European Athletics Championship), or a local event (e.g a football match of their favorite team, or city marathon). Active sport tourism participants have as main purpose of their travel, the active engagement in professional sports. Those participants can be professional athletes participating in an official sport (e.g basketball players), leisure activity (trail runners) or recreation activity (e.g hiking) participants (Schwarzenberger & Hyde, 2013).

## 2.1 Sport tourism current situation in Crete

Greece is a well-known, traditional destination choice for tourists with tourism sector contributing to approximately 16% of the GDP each year (Nantsou, 2014). Hospitality and tourism create a growth on foreign revenue and new arrivals from abroad (Papadopoulou, 2020). The management model Greece follows, and which affects the tourism sector needs improvements to reach similar levels of competitiveness as of other European countries (Papadopoulou, 2020). The local stakeholders in Greece's biggest island, Crete, seek ways to improve tourism development through alternative and innovative implementations.

In the Strategic planning report for years 2024-2028, announced by the Hellenic Republic -Crete island regional Council, tourism offered in Crete is divided in two main categories. The first one includes the "mass tourism", representing the highest percentage of incoming tourism campaign named "Sun and Sea". The second category named "alternative tourism", focuses on the destination advantages Crete offers, regarding distinguished natural, historical, cultural, folklore and culinary wealth, compared to other regions. Emphasis is given on tourism products which elevate the advantages of the island in regard of culinary tourism, nature tourism etc. (Hellenic Republic Regional Council of Crete Island, 2024). Tourists often seek authentic experiences in the host community including interpersonal relations, well-being, the consumption of local products and the use of services (Herbold et al., 2020).

The island of Crete is ranked among the top touristic destinations, in the sea and sun category, among other European island destinations of the Mediterranean region. Tourist satisfaction related to how their expectations have been met during holidays, reaches over 90%. Based on the results of the European project "Smart Tour" (July 2023), the returning tourists, wish to spend time on cultural themed activities (38.3%), agricultural tourism activities (36.8%), with culinary activities (33.3%), and with sport tourism (35.4%). There were five (5) categories of alternative tourism options in Crete with sport tourism only been mentioned for sea sport and diving related activities. (Hellenic Republic Regional Council of Crete Island, 2024)

## 2.2 The role of sports in a destination's image

The constantly growing competition among destinations to attract visitors (Taberner & Juncà, 2021), highlights the fundamental need for destination management organizations (DMOs) to develop strategic planning (Hristov & Zehrer, 2019). An effective strategy for attracting visitors, includes innovative development approach and diverse marketing techniques (Cró & Martins, 2018). Using various strategies (e.g marketing, branding, positioning) aims at three primary objectives: to increase brand visibility, to influence consumer's perception of a destination and to promote the place to a broad audience (Zenker, 2014). To achieve this successfully, the effective collaboration between stakeholders from both public and private sector is vital (de las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020).

Tourists' decision on what destination they choose to visit, may be influenced by the existing information, the credibility, the perceived image and the fascination a destination evokes (Girish et al., 2021). Destination fascination is described as "the extent to which a destination gives tourists the freedom to pay attention to their interests, to freely explore details in the destination, and to freely and personally define meanings of the destination" (Liu et al., 2017, p. 256).

The local community in Crete, seems to not have yet fully recognised the contribution potential of sport tourism to destination management. For small islands to compete effectively and attract annually large numbers of tourists, they need to promote the uniqueness of nature and culture. Crete combines a unique natural environment comprising of mountains, gorges, caves, forestry areas and of course the Mediterranean Sea. All these allow the development of multiple "active leisure" nature activities and "adventure tourism" activities. The activities which take place on the land include horse riding, golfing, mountain climbing (11 climbing areas), mountain hiking (with Crete being the second most important Greek destination after Kalymnos island), cycling / mountain biking (49 cycling routes of various levels), paragliding with 13 main slopes, bungee jumping and skydiving schools. The sea activities include windsurfing, kitesurfing, wave sailing and scuba diving activities at sea caves and shipwrecks along with many other sea sports. Major sport events take place for sailing racing (INSETE, 2021).

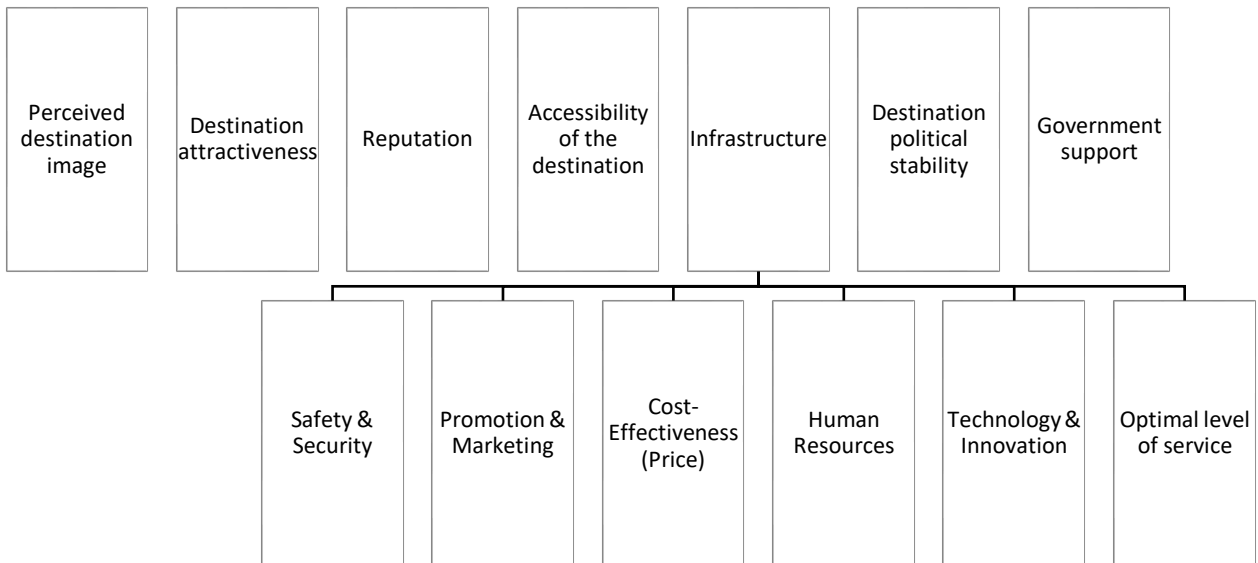
Crete has the capacity to host sport events after necessary maintenance interventions at the existing sport facilities to respond to the demands of athletes' training requirements and to host international competitions. Pankritio stadium, Heraklion municipality's National Sports Centre is a multi-purpose sports centre with its facilities including indoor gym, indoor swimming pool, wrestling, boxing fencing, weightlifting, shooting, rowing simulator on water, table tennis and Tae Kwon Do (INSETE, 2021).

### **2.3 Destination image in small islands.**

Visual content shared on social media platforms such as Instagram, has a significant impact on how people form their opinion, experiences and memories about a travel destination (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020a). The continuous development of social media usage defines considerably how effective a destination's marketing promotion can be (Laurell & Björner, 2018). Therefore, social media are commonly used as a marketing strategy by different tourism stakeholders (Laurell & Björner, 2018) and as a platform of destination image co-creation, by tourists (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020b)

A person's individual perceptions of a destination are created from personal experiences, narratives and their subjective interpretation of information. This results in a destination having multiple 'images' which provide a better understanding of a place. To benefit from the identity image of a destination, there are a few factors that need to be considered in advance (Munar, 2011). These include the various interactions among stakeholders, the sociocultural background, and the destination's characteristics. Some of these factors are easier controlled than others (Munar, 2011). Moradi et al., 2023, identified and evaluated 13 key factors that relate to the level of Sport Tourism Destination Competitiveness (STDC) in small islands.

Figure 2. Factors affecting STDC in small islands (Moradi et al., 2023)



For the host destination, managers and stakeholders need to provide outstanding service, engaging entertainment and sport activities to cover sports visitors' preferences. An effective marketing strategy has a critical role in promoting the destination's image for tourism development. The diverse nature of island sports tourism and the attractions offered present a significant opportunity to attract visitors. Small island sports managers should invest in strategic planning. Taking appropriate actions leads to identifying the benefits of sports tourism and developing long-term sustainability plans, ultimately driving the long-term growth of sport tourism sector. One of the most valuable non-physical assets for a destination, is a favorable reputation which enhances tourism and sports tourism. A destination's adequate accessibility is highly important especially for small islands. Accessibility is intertwined with transportation infrastructure and in continuation to this, a well-developed infrastructure system has an impact on the destination's economic growth and attractiveness. As a result of developing the infrastructure in small islands, sport tourism is supported along with other necessary services to visitors and sport tourists (Moradi et al., 2023).

The feeling of security and safety a destination provides plays an important role in tourists' decision making (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017). For a small island, a strategic holistic approach on crisis resolution / prevention plan and security among stakeholders, tourists and the local population is

vital for sport tourism future development (Moradi et al., 2023). At the same level (5<sup>th</sup>), a marketing strategy with emphasis on what makes the destination unique, is mentioned as a success factor for competitiveness. Other factors in this level include a flexible pricing strategy (cost-effectiveness) for different destinations during the year, continuous skills and education development opportunities for human resources, synchronous software of information and communication technology (ICT), and quality of services offered to the sport tourists' expectation level (Moradi et al., 2023). All of these interact and define a small island's attractiveness to sport tourists.

At the 6<sup>th</sup> level the place's political stability is found which is an indicator of security and safety perception for visitors. Finally at the 7<sup>th</sup> level, government supportive engagement is considered the base of all other factors, as it has a crucial direct or indirect impact on them and on Sport Tourism Destination Competitiveness (STDC).

### **3 Research Implementation**

#### **3.1 Research objectives, problems and questions**

Sports tourism isn't reaching its potential in Pankritio stadium, and the study aims to figure out the unidentified opportunities and prerequisites on what can be done to reach its development. There are two main objectives of this study. The first one is to gain a deep understanding of the challenges which prevent sport tourism from being developed to its full potential in Heraklion city (e.g sport facilities requirements, rehabilitation / physical therapy facilities availability). The second objective is to emphasize the importance and necessity of sport tourism and find out the opportunities and prerequisites for future development specifically at Pankritio stadium. To provide greater theoretical and empirical understanding, into the topic, the research questions supporting the objectives are:

- What is the current sport tourism situation in Heraklion's Pankritio stadium?
- What infrastructure actions the stakeholders find important in developing Sport Tourism?
- What future interventions will benefit sport tourism development in Pankritio stadium in Heraklion, Crete?

These research questions will try to explore the opinions and perspectives of different stakeholders on sport tourism and to find development opportunities. The local community hosting a sports tourism event plays a vital role for the smooth operation from planning to executing the event (Chersulich Tomino et al., 2020). Each stakeholder (e.g organizers, club managers, sponsors) actively participates in a different way during an event organization. Therefore, they have different expectations of the outcome, and different evaluation standards of the sport event impacts. (Chersulich Tomino et al., 2020).

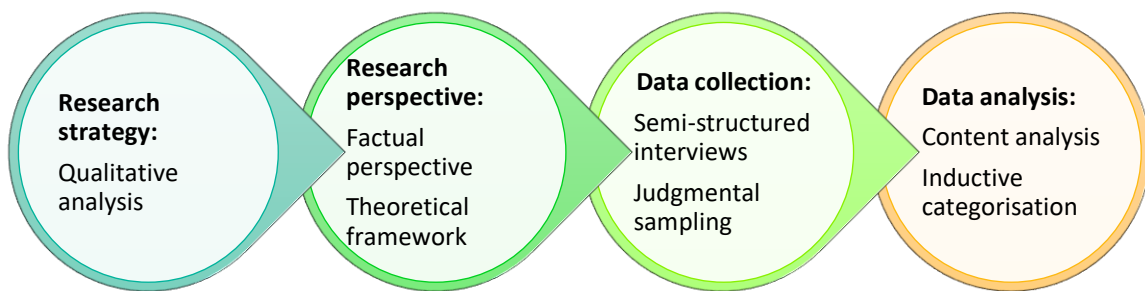
According to the Strategic Planning report for the years 2024-2028, published by the Crete island's Council of Hellenic Republic (2024), over 40% of tourists who visited Crete island once, have come back to visit again. What is interesting in this report, is the fact that among these categories, sport tourism is only mentioned as relevant to sea sports and sea diving activities. No other reference is made for participation in other sport tourism activities neither in sport tourism offered opportunities.

Despite the touristic recognition of Crete internationally, there is a need for more targeted and coordinated strategy from sport tourism industry stakeholders regarding marketing, facilities management and attractions, to better promote, reinforce and manage sport tourism. Sport tourism incorporates different policymakers and leverages the development of local economy sociocultural and environmental interactions by involving local community resident's support (Chang et al., 2020); (Ziakas, 2020); (Martins et al., 2024). When sport events are strategically managed and developed, there are economic, social and environmental dimensions stimulated. Taking into consideration that Crete's economy is primarily based on tourism, the idea is that as an alternative type of tourism, enhancing sport tourism will affect regional touristic activity and growth. The importance of this study is to offer answers on how to enhance sport tourism in Heraklion municipality. In order to enhance Heraklion city's competitiveness, as a sport tourism destination, there is a need for coordinated actions between the sport tourism industry stakeholders. The research is based on the interpretation of data from semi-structured interviews, and observation of the sport facilities of Pankritio stadium.

### 3.2 Research design and process

The research design as an inquiry procedure comprises of the three stages: planning, implementation and analysis of the collected data. More specifically it consists of the research problem, the research method of data collection, the analysis and interpretation of collected data but also the theoretical framework. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The research design of the present master thesis is visually explained in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Research design of the thesis study



A qualitative research analysis will be conducted to deeply understand the current situation of the researched topic. The goal is to receive the perceptions and opinions of the participants about the issue and to understand facts. The qualitative analysis focuses on learning the meaning that each participant holds about the topic and then interpret the information. Therefore, it is necessary to collect open – ended forms of data where participants feel free to share their ideas. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022)

This thesis research design is built to support a factual approach and is based on description and evaluation of the findings through the selected theoretical framework. With this approach, through interviews, the researcher intends to collect the relevant stakeholders' views and opinions and understand the reality of the phenomenon. While conducting this research, the aim is to understand the current state of Heraklion municipality's main sport facilities (Pankritio stadium) in

organizing and hosting national and international track and field events. The idea is, to offer suggestions on what challenges need to be resolved, leading to the strategic planning of sport tourism.

The data collection procedure in qualitative research can be carried out with different methods and multiple forms of data including interviews (structured, semi-structured, unstructured), observations, documents (official reports, e-mails, newspapers etc), audiovisual and digital materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). In this research semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather multiple perspectives from individuals on organizing sport events. The interviewees represent different groups, and the collected information could vary, this is why it is important to offer the freedom to present their personal perspective with semi-structured interviews. The main questions were pre-defined in advance and are described in Appendix 1.

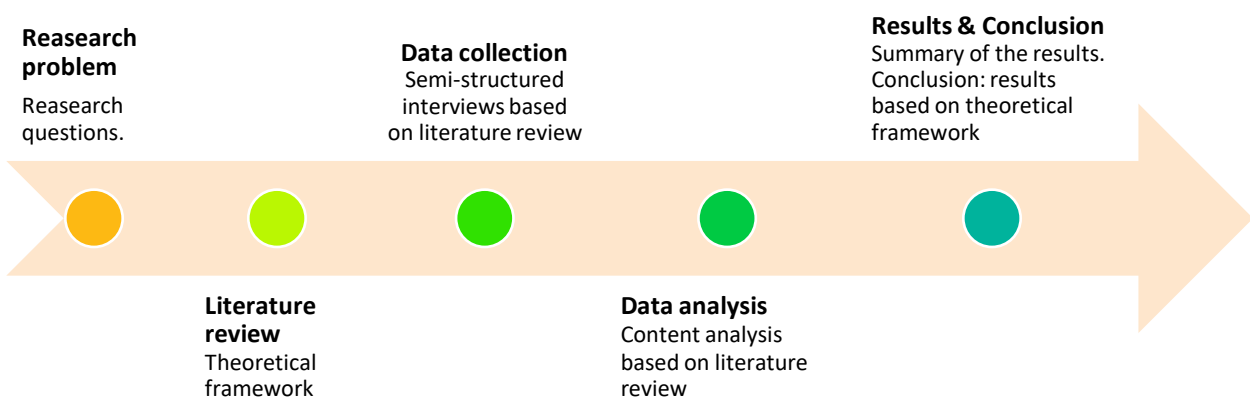
Figure 4. Stakeholders to be interviewed



Content analysis is chosen for the interpretation of data in this study, to give emphasis on the interviewees' narratives, perspective and understanding of the discussed topic (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This involves the participants' perspectives and experiences as data at the core of the analysis to derive concepts and themes. It is an iterative process of analyzing data and reviewing the literature to interpret emerging concepts (Neeley & Dumas, 2016). In qualitative content analysis, it is a common approach to look for themes that emerge from the interview responses and to categorize the data (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Inductive categorization of the data will be used as an analysis approach with theme categories and coding. Essentially the data obtained from the interviews receives a textual character after being transformed into written text for the interpretive analysis (Hackley, 2019). The interpretation of the textual collected data categories and themes will support the research problem.

Qualitative research often requires a more evolving and flexible approach between the research components. This type of research is an ongoing process. Collecting and analyzing the data happens recursively with the theoretical hypothesis formation and writing. The researcher is perceived as the instrument for data collection, which in comparison to quantitative research would be the questionnaire. The researcher is interested in patterns and interpretations and approaches the data with an open mind and without limitations and assumptions. (Veal & Darcy, 2014, pp. 254-255)

Figure 5. The research process



### 3.3 Data collection

In a qualitative study, enough implemented interviews and data collected are not specified. Obtaining the appropriate number of interviews is not strictly defined, if the data responds to the research questions (Bekele & Ago, 2022). The researcher needs to collect as much data as needed to answer the research questions and understand the research problem in depth.

The research interview sessions were carried out between April 1<sup>st</sup> and April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025. Participants were sampled strategically keeping in mind their relevance to the research questions (Bekele & Ago, 2022). All interviewees (operations coordinator of Pankritio Stadium's sport facilities, deputy mayor of Sports division, Crete island regional deputy governor of Sports division, sports club's manager, Hellenic Athletics Federation technical consultant and track & field coach) work either in Pankritio stadium facilities or in Heraklion city's municipality and Crete's region sports administration departments. All individuals were chosen from and represent several categories of Crete's island Sport Division to provide a more comprehensive perspective on sport tourism current situation and future needs for further development. The interviewees are all involved with their profession in the specific stadium facilities under study. An interview with a representative from the Association of Cretan travel and tourism agencies of Crete (ACTTA) was intended to take place but was not possible. After contacting them by phone, they asked for a written request of the purpose of the interview, but they never replied back to set the time.

Six semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. The recording of each interview was done from a voice recording application on a mobile phone and notes were taken simultaneously during the interview, to ensure all data information is noted. In addition to the pre-decided basic questions, guided explanatory questions were asked where necessary. All individuals were comfortable during the interview and very open to expressing personal opinions and facts, since they have known the researcher on personal level through the years, when the researcher was training and competing for track and field championships in Crete. The stadium facilities are already known to the researcher, as she has worked in football and athletics sports clubs.

The sport tourism events held in Pankritio stadium and the surrounding areas were observed from February until end of April 2025 with the most popular in participation being the "Run Greece".

This event is organized in six cities around Greece, with only two of them being on islands (Heraklion city in Crete island and Syros island) (SEGAS, n.d.). A national championship for athletes of throwing sports (javelin, discus, hammer etc.) was organized in February and a national track and field Schools championship (for under 18-year-old children who attend schools) was organized in April.

Purposely selected sport tourism industry stakeholders answered the interview questions and helped to understand and answer in detail the research questions of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Those stakeholders were chosen carefully based on pre-specified criteria, using purposive sampling. The criteria included their professional identity, responsibilities, duties, and role in relation to sport tourism at Heraklion city and the Pankritio stadium Sports Facilities or The Crete island's Regional Sport Division Administration. The stakeholders represent different groups so that the given information would offer different points of understanding on the topic under study.

Each participant was contacted in person to receive information, in short, about the purpose of the interview and to be asked for permission for participation. The purpose of the specific study was mentioned and explained shortly both during the phone call and at the beginning of the interview. The meaning of sport tourism and the types of sport tourists had to be mentioned and clarified in some interviews. A meeting time was agreed at the interviewees' workplace following the request. All interviewees agreed to attend the face-to-face interview, mentioning the importance of the topic and their sense of responsibility to contribute to the development of sport tourism in Heraklion, by responding to the questions.

Confidentiality and anonymity were mentioned to everyone who participated in the interviews. The fact that most of the people, except one, have known me for many years, the discussion was pleasant, open and with a natural way of expressing their way of thinking. None of the individuals gave written answers to the questions without the presence of the interviewer and the questions were not sent in advance to them. In table 2 the professional identity of the stakeholders is described with a code as name, along with the interview characteristics (date, duration and type of implementation). Two interviewees represented the public sector (municipality of Heraklion city

Council and region of Crete administration council. One interviewee represented the Greek National Athletics Federation, one was a sport's club manager (track and field, football, volleyball) at the Pankritio stadium. One was a coach of a different track and field sports club at the same facilities and the last person was the facilities operations manager for two sports centers in Heraklion city including the stadium under study.

Table 1. Interview coding

<b>Responder</b>	<b>Interview date</b>	<b>Interview duration</b>	<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Interview implementation</b>
R1	1.4.2025	17 min	Sports club manager	Meeting
R2	2.4.2025	20 min	Facilities operations manager	Meeting
R3	3.4.2025	15 min	Deputy mayor of sports in Heraklion	Meeting
R4	3.4.2025	14 min	Deputy regional governor for Sports (Crete island)	Meeting
R5	4.4.2025	16 min	Track & Field Coach	Meeting
R6	5.4.2025	16 min	National Athletics Federation technical advisor	Meeting
R7	-	-	Cretan travel and tourism agencies of Crete	No meeting

Certain themes were noticed in advance of the interviews and the interview questions were created according to the dimensions of the topic under study and were based on the reviewed literature. As the stakeholders represent different groups, the interview questions were adjusted during each interview and the order varied slightly. Since semi-structured interviews are based on interactive human conversation, the pace and the order of questions is possible to change during each interview to receive more details (Qu & Dumay, 2011). During the interview, it is crucial for the interviewer to guarantee the important topics will be covered in the discussion, regardless the original order of the planned questions (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Some questions' content and themes came up naturally during the conversation and were mentioned by the interviewees.

Six interviews took place from April 1<sup>st</sup> to April 15<sup>th</sup> and the length of the interview sessions was 14 to 20 minutes. All of them were held in person and face to face with everyone. Five interviews were held in the facilities of the Pankritio stadium, one took place at a conference room before the start of the event where the regional deputy mayor of the sport division participated. All interviews were recorded with Voice Recorder app for Android and transcribed later on in a Word document making sure that the text from the automated transcription of the m4a audio file matches the voice file of each interview correctly and editing the text where necessary. Permission to record each interview was requested and granted in advance, when meeting the person and before setting up the recording. The purpose of the interview and the data anonymity will be explained to the interviewees in advance. This master's research study was actualized in Crete island in Greece, and since all participants including the interviewer were Greek nationals, each interview was consequently held in Greek. The transcription was done in greek language and then translated in English by the researcher, after analyzing the theme categories of the data.

All interview data collected was then analyzed and presented anonymously to ensure the privacy of the participants. Regardless the fact that the interviewees represented different units of public or private sector, similar answers to interview questions occurred during the interview process. The aim of this research was to discover the personal viewpoints and experiences on the topic of each participant. As a result, the number of interviews collected seemed adequate to offer information that answers the research questions, and therefore a sufficient level of saturation was reached.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Qualitative data may occur from interviews, conversations, personal observations or other similar sources. Data sets provide deeper insights into how society is formed through the analysis of language, behavior and social interactions, but its processing requires classification and interpretation (Hackley, 2019). In this study, the data were recorded on the mobile phone and automatically transcribed using Microsoft Word transcription tool. After this, each transcription was read carefully paying attention in detail while listening again to the recorded interviews. Some editing was made to the automated text to match the recorded answers.

During the data analysis process, the gathering and analysis of data happens concurrently, with the researcher trying to clarify the research questions. Also, at an early stage, during recording and transcription of the initial data the researcher reflects on the material gathered and on the collected data simultaneously (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

Content analysis model is incorporated in the methodological framework of this research, as it often occurs in qualitative research. Themes were assigned to the collected data so that they can be simplified and formed into categories. Following this thematic categorization, the relationship between themes and their elements was examined to understand similarities and differences in the collected data. Aspects relevant to the research questions were observed and analyzed before formulating the results.

### **3.5 Ethics and trustworthiness**

Before conducting the interviews in this qualitative study, a data recording approach was planned to include observational and interview protocols. As part of the observational protocol, some descriptive notes were made during the interviews including the professional portrait of the participant and a reconstruction of some sentences of the dialogue. As for the interview protocol, it refers to an introduction on the subject under research, handwritten notes which were made in addition and during the recording of the audio file and the total number of the questions (between 8 and 10 depending on who is interviewed). Some of the questions were memorized and explanatory comments or sub questions were applied to get additional details. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). There was sufficient time to allow this qualitative research.

## **4 Results**

In this research, it became clear during the interviews that the sport facilities in Heraklion are under different management. This affects the funding available and consequently the “freedom” for decision making of the stakeholders involved. The department of the Greek Ministry of Education, Religion affairs and Sports which is responsible for the institutional, logistical and financial support of legal public and private sport entities is the General Secretariat of Sports (GSS) (Γενική Γραμματεία Αθλητισμού [General Secretariat of Sports], n.d.). GSS’s goal is to ensure the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of the sports entities’ work. The data collected from the present thesis

interviews aimed to provide insight into the current situation of sport tourism in the Heraklion municipality and into the future development opportunities. Focus was given to the events which are organized in Pankritio stadium facilities, the biggest multisport public sport facilities in Heraklion, Crete.

Follows a conceptual categorization of the data, using a comparative method of qualitative analysis. The data is organized into categories as broader themes into a cohesive category of answers. All the interview questions are described in Appendix 1 and the responses of the interviewees are presented under code names R1- R6 respectively, as described previously in Chapter 4.3.

#### **4.1 Management and financial support from local authorities or the government**

The interview questions investigated the local authorities' (at municipality and regional administration level) and the Greek government's attitudes, on whether they support sports tourism, as well as their actual role in co-organizing sport tourism events in Pankritio stadium. The local community seems to support the development of sports tourism. This is considered reasonable, given that they anticipate various benefits for the local economy of Heraklion municipality and Crete island in extend along with reputation for future visitors. All interviewees agreed that the main financial support for the operation of Pankritio stadium is offered by the Region of Crete Administration and to a smaller degree from the municipality. The Municipality of Heraklion administration is at the core function, a co-organizer for sport events, by providing medals, t-shirts or other non-monetary resources and by allocating human resources. Indirectly a part of the monthly subscriptions' fees of each athlete from the sport clubs, which operate in the stadium, goes to its operations. Two responders mentioned that there are also private or public sponsors occasionally.

*"The support from the Region and the Municipality of Heraklion Administration for the events that take place here is at a very high level. Fundamentally, the main funder of the events is the Region of Crete Administration. All year round we organize sport activities in collaboration with the Sport Federations representatives or the local authorities." (R2)*

*“The Municipality of Heraklion is usually a co-organizer. They provide trophies, medals, plaques, and T-shirts.” (R3)*

*“We have sponsors, private companies as sports equipment or sports clothes stores and occasionally public bodies as the Association of Tourist and Travel Agencies of Crete.” (R6)*

*“The Region of Crete Council is involved in discounts that can be offered on ferry tickets or on bus tickets for their transportation.” (R4)*

On the other hand, the government through the Ministry of Sports has not been actively present for over 10 years, regarding the financial support which was agreed for the maintenance of the facilities, the promotion of sports tourism and the level of offered services. All the responses included the same view on governmental support which is that it is absent. There has been a gap in implementation of agreed funding since the year 2010.

*“The Ministry of Sport doesn’t support the maintenance of the facilities.” (R1)*

*“The government doesn't contribute to these, they don't give direct money to a municipality to enable the actualization of events, restoration of facilities or to cover any other needs. Anything related to sports facilities, their maintenance, or their operation, the government is 95 % of the times absent.” (R2)*

*“The management of the Pankritio stadium has been assigned to the Municipality of Heraklion by a programmatic agreement from the Ministry of Culture to the General Secretariat of Sports, with one obligation: to provide 300,000 euros annually for its maintenance and 100,000 for events during the first 3 months of each year. These funds have not been provided since 2010, when the agreement was signed.” (R3)*

*“Compared to the other 12 regions in the country, the Region of Crete Administration, spends significantly more money on sports than any other region. It supports sports*

*clubs through co-organizations and grants. The Region Council is usually a co-organizer, financially assisting the parties involved to carry out the games. It does not get involved in inviting athletes to participate in camps or similar activities. To put it in numbers, the elected regional administration from 2010 to today has committed resources of 17 million for sports facilities, with legal obligations arising from this money exceeding 14 million. This means that 14 million has been allocated over these years, and projects worth 14 million.” (R4)*

In conclusion, regarding whether Crete island’s authorities support sports tourism, the answer is strongly positive from all responders. Not only do they are open to new ideas and promote them, but they also enthusiastically follow and welcome every event, especially major competitions. There are many volunteers especially for Track and Field related competitions, which facilitates Greek and foreign tourists throughout the year in all their participation stages and proves the local community support. The local community of the city of Heraklion and the wider area of Crete island is positive towards sports tourism and supports it. They participate with their Federation’s clubs in sports activities.

## **4.2 The current state of Sports Tourism in Pankritio Stadium**

### **Level of sports facilities**

There is a contrast of opinions when the responders were asked about the level of facilities. Two responders (R5, R1) agreed that the level of current Pankritio stadium facilities is very high, even though R1 admits that the location of the sport center is challenging and has natural wear. One responder (R2) said that the level is very basic and cannot be compared to neighbor countries e.g Turkey where big sport centers with competitive facilities exist. R3 and R4 agree that maintenance is a problem that needs constant effort and cannot be handled completely now. Responder 6 mentioned that the facilities are in a very good condition to cover the needs of a sports tourism visitor from another country.

*“I believe the facilities are at a very high level. The location of the Pankritio stadium is challenging because it is built so close to the seashore. It has natural wear due to the humidity of the sea area. The stadium’s current situation is not an obstacle in my*

*opinion. The organized events can reach a high level, for example the organization of a World Championship” (R1)*

*“Pankritio stadium facilities are good at a basic level, yes. They cannot be compared to our competitors' who offer hammam and cryotherapy, for example Gloria sports center in Antalya” (R2)*

*“The stadium was completely closed for 6 years. In 2010 it was assigned to the Municipality, and the Municipality of Heraklion has been running operations since 2010. ... It is by the sea and there is natural damage. The indoor space is kept in good condition, with the outdoors of the building we have problems in maintenance” (R3)*

*“We have sports facilities that require continuous improvement and maintenance. You can't just build them and leave them to chance. There must be fully equipped, respectable and functional sport facilities, licensed and modern, to potentially compete with other destinations.” (R4)*

The number of existing facilities cannot serve the needs of all the people who want to visit from abroad as the groups overlap. The availability of existing facilities and the number of facilities seem to be a significant concern that doesn't allow sporting events to happen more often.

*“The main problem is the availability of sports facilities, to what extent they are available at the time and day needed and with the equipment that is necessary. It is not only about the number of existing facilities, but also the availability. Currently it is not possible to organize big football or swimming events because of the lack of necessary sport facilities. Essentially availability does not exist in practice to accommodate the high demand... The current facilities of Pankritio stadium are full of children from the sports clubs. We also receive group visits in the mornings from schools. Also, if the Easter holiday is at the same period for Christians and Catholics, both populations Greeks and people from abroad visit simultaneously the facilities. We are talking about 180 additional visitors in a stadium which already has accommodation issues.*

*We do not have an indoor track and field stadium with specifications to host a championship.” (R2)*

*“More sport events could be organized but there is a difficulty. There are no available facilities and there are no free weekends to organize the events and attract sports tourists.” (R6)*

### **Level of events organized**

Regarding the level of events that have been organized and held in the facilities, it ranges most of the time from National championships to Regional Track and field events. There is a special emphasis on the organization of running events with a common reference in all answers about Run Greece running event. It is the major sport tourism event that takes place in Heraklion city every year since 2013 and uses as the finish line the Pankritio stadium facilities.

Another event that is held every year and uses the facilities is Rally Crete, with national and international participation of sport tourists. Efforts are made to attract football sport events as well. Every year, summer camps are held. There is also participation of students from other countries through the Erasmus European program, who come as part of their studies.

*“With the Erasmus program, students between 18-22 years old visit Pankritio stadium as part of their academic internship. Summer camps for children between 5-12 years old are organized during schools’ summer vacation. Summer camps have a broad reputation and attract children of families who visit Crete as tourists from other cities or other countries” (R1)*

*“Run Greece is one of the biggest running races that takes place in our city. Rally of Crete is a major national race that takes place in our city with participants and visitors from all parts of Greece and from abroad. We plan to create a special route within the city along the waterfront, with the aim of showcasing the Venetian castle, and the coastal area of the city. We have other running events: the Knossos Run, we have the Kazantzakeia track and field event, and this year the National High schools’*

*track and field championship will take place in May. We will host 2 friendly matches of the Greek National men's Football Team this summer in June.” (R3)*

*“... Run Greece is the number 1 sport tourism event organized in Heraklion since 2013. Athletes finish the run inside the Pankritio stadium. Participants reached 4.500 this year.” (R5)*

### **Group of participants**

Some responders (n=2) mentioned that sport tourists in Pankritio stadium mostly come from Germany and Denmark. Other countries include Netherlands and UK.

*“Athletes from Germany and Denmark show preference for Kazantzakeia track & field event every year. Last year about 25 athletes from these 2 countries participated and, children and adults participate from all over Greece” (R1)*

*“We have athletes from all over Europe. They mainly visit in March and April each year, for competition preparation. Last year, Karalis' group (greek pole vault jumper) was here for two weeks, along with other top pole vaulters. This year, a large group came from Germany with a German coach. We've had people from Denmark, from the Netherlands, and athletes from UK visiting as well.” (R5)*

*“Crete receives 1/3 of world tourists. As for sport tourists, several teams of professionals (military staff, police staff, dentists etc.) gather and play tournaments in different cities, also in Heraklion.” (R3)*

### **Transportation**

Two responders (R3, R6) agreed that Pankritio stadium is easily accessible by car. R3 also mentioned the accessibility of the island by sea and air.

*“The Pankritio stadium is easily accessible by car and is visited daily. It's close to the port, the airport, and the city centre, within the urban area of the city and close to accommodation units.” (R3)*

One responder (R1) expressed satisfaction and specifically refers to arriving in Heraklion city by air or by sea and by public transportation. There is a contrary opinion of R1 when referring to the logistics cost for someone to arrive in Heraklion compared to travelling to mainland destinations and by the end specifically concludes that there is a difficulty regarding transportation when a national championship is organized.

*“The public transport including airplane and boat is very good for someone who wants to travel to Heraklion city to exercise in a sport tourism event, or to attend as a spectator. Travelling to Crete by airplane is more expensive than using the train or bus for example for other destinations in the mainland. There is also a difficulty when a national track and field competition is organized because of the public transportation system” (R1)*

R1, R2 and R6 share the same opinion on the transportation cost.

*“The cost increases because from Athens the capital of Greece, where most planes land, people need an additional transfer, either by ferry or by plane.” (R6)*

*“We are among the most expensive destinations. The cost for Federations is higher than in the mainland events and obviously each Federation emphasizes on the total expenses rather than the services received. We bid for national championships but Federations and organizing bodies are not interested.” R2*

One responder only referred to accessing Crete island by means of transportation without referring to reaching the stadium.

*“We have six entry points to Crete: three ports and three airports.” (R4)*

### **Advantages of Crete island, Heraklion city and Pankritio Stadium**

All responders agreed that the main advantage of Crete Island as a destination is the climate, the cultural heritage, the food choices and the natural characteristics (mountains, sun and sea). This is a unique combination for the region and the visitor can combine a mountain sport tourism event but also in a few hours be by the sea. All year-round warm climate, long days of sunshine and a unique combination of local diet products make Crete attractive to tourists. Pankritio stadium is located right in front of the sea and according to the answer of a responder, this is appealing.

*“Sports tourism will develop when our culture, our civilization, our Cretan diet, our sun is combined with cheap tickets so that someone can come to Heraklion.” (R2)*

*“Track & field athletes from abroad visit Crete to take advantage of the nice weather conditions. I believe the conditions are excellent. The big advantage for the stadium is that it's located next to the sea. This appeals to tourists coming from Central Europe and Scandinavia because they want the sea.” (R6)*

### **Benefits of sport tourism for the economic development in Heraklion**

All responders admitted that sport tourism events have a vital meaning for Heraklion city. Some responders shared a common view on the positive impact of sport tourism events for Heraklion city economy. They emphasized that tourism in general in all forms is the main source of income for Greece and Crete Island. One responder mentioned the new job opportunities for locals in hotels and restaurants.

*“When you have international events in your city, this provides important financial support and offers job opportunities to many locals” (R2)*

*“This year, through our own initiative, we bid for the National Greek High School Track and Field Championship. Five hundred student athletes, along with their teachers, will come to Crete and stay here. Therefore, the entire economic cycle that will be generated will involve the Pankritio stadium and Heraklion city” (R5)*

*“Tourism is currently Greece's main source of income. Therefore, this income needs to be increased in sports tourism as well, because money will remain in Greek sports through sports tourism.” (R6)*

One responder also mentioned benefits for the hospitality industry regarding the early start of touristic summer period because of sport tourists arriving already in March.

*“Sport tourism is vital for Heraklion city and Crete in a broader sense. Athletes from other European countries visit Pankritio stadium for 1 to 1.5 months. This affects 2,3 hotels operation because they open 2 months before the official touristic season, so instead of May they operate in March already” (R2)*

From what was mentioned in the responses, it seems that there is not a commonly agreed strategic plan for promotion of Pankritio stadium as a host destination for sport tourism events. Both local Administration and regional Administration stakeholders cooperate strongly to create connections with Federations nationally and internationally and build a more personal bond.

Sadly, from the Ministry of sports and the government mechanism these efforts are not reinforced. It was mentioned that the local stakeholders are counting on the word-of-mouth from other athletes who visit Pankritio stadium with their team, and they chose to return the following year bringing other family members or other teams with them.

*“Those who choose to come to Heraklion, they could go to Cape Town, they could go to the Canary Islands, they could go to Antalya. The reasons why they come here are linked to the policy and culture of their Federation, and often personal relationships. Same people have been coming here for the last 12 years. The attraction of people to sports tourism and major sporting events is done by the Federations themselves.”(R2)*

*“Whatever action takes place is promoted through social media and the official press releases issued by the Region of Crete Council.” (R4)*

*“Information is shared and promoted by all media: the websites of the Federations, the Region of Crete, the Municipality of Heraklion, as well as all social media platforms like Facebook.” (R6)*

It is also remarkable that the strategic planning of the region of Crete does not include steps for sport tourism development but refers only from the perspective of the sea leisure sport tourism. There is nothing concrete on a collaboration for example with the Tourism Ministry to attract national and international level sport tourism organisations. Again, at a local regional level the situation is better as there is a collaboration with Travel Agencies. No specific marketing plan tailored for each sport that is accommodated inside Pankritio stadium facilities was mentioned. Also, the level of information communicated on the websites of the municipality of Heraklion needs improvement.

*“We are trying to create a collaboration with the tourism department, which has representatives at various exhibitions abroad. What will be of great value is to have electronic material on the website of the Municipality of Heraklion (department of Sports Development) that is responsible for the operation of the sports facilities, and in this way to move forward and promote future events.” (R2)*

*“Regarding future strategy plan and development opportunities, there is nothing concrete now. We have contact with various organizations. We are trying to bring events, that can benefit financially our city and encourage people to participate in sports.” (R3)*

*“For the strategic planning of Region of Crete for 2024-2028, we invest in Crete’s story telling for sunshine and sea natural characteristics. Our 5-year plan focuses on mass tourism because afterwards from that group you can direct tourists to other forms of tourism as a supplementary action. All that’s needed now are ideas – imagination, from this point forward. We already have flagship events that we support every year. And every time a good idea, a good thought comes along, which also has a feasible way to be implemented, it is certainly supported.” (R4)*

### 4.3 Infrastructure

Another topic came up during the discussions regarding the operational and technical equipment necessary to support bigger scale events such as the official football games of the national team. There were two similar answers (R2, R3).

*“If we want to host football events at Pankritio stadium, we do not have the facilities, we do not have the technical equipment like high quality cameras, video assistant referee VAR, necessary screens etc.” (R2)*

*“The Ministry of Sports does not provide us with the equipment (cameras) necessary for high level matches for football which come at a significant cost. This prevents us from hosting high-level games.” (R3)*

Lastly, the direct need for stadium infrastructure is highly important as it shows from the next two responses.

*“The necessary resources are primarily financial and secondly related to available facilities. First, you need to strengthen the infrastructure to do sports tourism, and then you promote it, then you take pictures, you put it in your electronic brochure to show what you have, your services, your people. The first thing is to have infrastructure, and we're talking now about sports tourism of fields (as in football fields) and stadiums, we're not talking about alternative forms of tourism as mountain cycling. To give you a concrete example, new swimming facilities need to be built, to host the existing athletes of the sports academies', athletes who train every day, visitor athletes and spectators.” (R2)*

*“Perhaps a city friendlier to the running movement, with wider sidewalks or paths like those for bicycles in other large cities in Greece and Europe, could have greater appeal for such events in the future. They could create such pedestrian paths for those who choose to run outside of a stadium facility.” (R5)*

## 5 Conclusion

As discussed earlier, Crete Island is a top destination choice for tourists from countries around the world. A defining factor that has an impact on its economic development is tourism. Islands often build their strategy on sporting events to attract international visitors and boost their profile image and visibility (Van Rheenen et al., 2024). The number of tourists visiting consequently affects hotel and restaurant bookings and revenue (Van Rheenen et al., 2024).

While sport tourism industry has become a successful and profitable field elsewhere, in Heraklion city there is room for improvement. However, organizing sports events on islands requires overcoming distinct challenges related to infrastructure, transportation, high cost and resource management (Kapareliotis & Voutsina, 2020). Overcoming these challenges requires strong stakeholders' collaboration at all levels and with all involved parties (Kapareliotis & Voutsina, 2020).

This study offers an insight into sports tourism current level, the challenges for further development opportunities, and the dynamics among local management and government policymakers. The answers from all responders show a common point of view on the importance of sport tourism for Heraklion municipality with a focus on the biggest public sport facilities currently existing, the Pankritio stadium. Crete Region's stakeholders receive a special recognition for the support so far from all interviewees. Through this research study certain issues came up, revealing the insufficient communication and collaboration among governmental and regional stakeholders which has a negative impact on the financial aspect, crucial for Pankritio stadium operations. Additionally, the infrastructure (e.g sport facilities, transportation and digital marketing channels) has not been developing well enough.

To effectively boost sport tourism in Heraklion city, local managers involved need to follow a strategic plan while highlighting the location's unique characteristics and comparative advantages among other locations. Improving and expanding sports tourism actions at Pankritio stadium will significantly boost its popularity and attract more sport tourism visitors nationally and internationally. This will then have an impact to the greater economic and social well-being for local communities and Greece, the country.

## 6 Discussion

After the collection and analysis of the data and with the theoretical framework in mind, the following suggestions were formed regarding the sport tourism development in Pankritio stadium, Heraklion municipality:

One significant action that needs to be taken, is the implementation of the financial agreement between the Ministry of Sports of Greek government and the municipality of Heraklion administration which runs the operations now. Pankritio stadium is licensed to host all levels of championships provided that the status of facilities infrastructure allows the organization. Improved facilities will boost the appeal of the stadium and bidding for new sport events at all levels could more successful. Also, with the proper financial support from the government, the necessary technical equipment can be renewed to support higher level sport events and attract more tourists.

Since the current facilities' hosting capacity is limited and as a result, they are not always available when needed because of the high volume of visitors, new stadiums need to be built to accommodate the potential sport events organized.

A well-organized marketing strategy for Heraklion municipality to develop as a sports tourism hub, is needed. The arrivals of tourists who wish to experience the destination as athletes in an event, or as spectators can combine their visit with outdoor sports recreation-adventure activities that Crete Island offers. Visitors are given the option to participate in sport tourism events while experiencing the culture and the history of Crete

Continuous improvement of the surrounding city transportation network leading to Pankritio stadium. Built by the sea, the stadium offers the opportunity for a unique experience. Walking paths and a longer running trail needs to be formed ensuring the safety of all participants especially for running events organized in Heraklion city which end inside the Stadium.

### 6.1 Importance of this study for Pankritio Stadium

A strong partnership among stakeholders is needed to facilitate strategically developed initiatives and action plans, utilizing the support from government. Destination management policy must be

in favor of Crete island's competitive characteristics and eventually develop sport tourism. The study revealed that the Federations are reluctant to participate in sport events in Heraklion city, Pankritio stadium because the cost of transportation is significantly higher than the cost of participating at a sport event in mainland of Greece. Lastly, the marketing and promotion strategy so far is limited to visitors of sport tourism from certain countries who have visited the stadium in the past. A marketing strategy is necessary to promote sport tourism abroad so Pankritio can become a competitive sport host destination.

## **6.2 Suggestions for future research**

Considering the insightful information on the specific stadium after reviewing the current state, the challenges and opportunities for development, there are some ideas for further study on island sport tourism. There is a necessity to address the socio-economic aspect, the decision-making framework and the destination competitiveness to get a more comprehensive and detailed understanding. Also, regarding the relationships between private and public sector stakeholders would be interesting to see how they benefit the sport tourism event hosting. Another interesting topic for further research would be the use of smart technology as AI and how this can make visitor's experience attractive and efficient. Of course, it is highly important to deepen our understanding on sustainability issue, as Crete island and Heraklion city are highly touristic destinations.

## **6.3 Ethicality, Trustworthiness, and Limitations**

In this master thesis, qualitative research was focused only on Pankritio stadium facilities in Heraklion Crete. Therefore, the results do not represent the Region of Crete but only the sport tourism situation in the specific Stadium in municipality of Heraklion. The findings and the suggestions for further sport tourism development may in some cases apply valuable perspective to other stadiums. Even though the researcher knew personally most of the interview participants, there were no personal opinions expressed that could affect the participants' responses. In more detail the research method, the aim, the data collection and data analysis are described above in the methodology part. Also, the researcher did not represent any commissioner which provides another element of neutrality of the role on the topic discussed and the implementation of this study.

Before the interviews, each participant was informed about the purpose of the interview, the anonymity of the responses and the data protection. Permission for recording was requested and granted in each case. The responders remained anonymous, and their answers were presented in quotes with a short reference to their code number varying from R1 to R6 without any reference to their identity. The responses were transcribed to English in digital form and were carefully and in detail edited so that the text would match the audio material, as the original interviews took place in Greek language. Only six out of seven participants accepted to be interviewed, and this unfortunately creates a gap on the opinions of a tourism agency representative, to have a well rounded perspective on the sport tourism situation in Heraklion and Pankritio stadium.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview Questions

1. Could you describe the current state of Sport Tourism in Pankritio Stadium facilities?
2. In your opinion, is there strong support from (a) the local authorities or (b) central government on promoting sport tourism in Heraklion?
3. In (what ways )your opinion is sport tourism vital for the economic development in Heraklion?
4. Does this region have specific characteristics (environmental, structural, facilities, services, etc.) which are beneficial to sport tourism promotion and in what way?
5. Which are the best examples of sport tourism services (e.g programs/ activities) promoted in the area and why they are considered successful?
6. How is sport tourism promoted in the area (e.g social media)?
7. Which are the main challenges / difficulties in sport tourism promotion in Heraklion?
8. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages in Heraklion municipality regarding the facilitation and development of sport tourism?
9. What is the future strategy for the development of sport tourism in Heraklion?
10. What resources are needed to support sport tourism development?