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# **Bachelor's Thesis**

for the Degree of

Bachelor of Art

**How do networks along outdoor and pilgrimage trails, such as the St. Olav Waterway, act as catalysts for sustainable regional development and what role does slow tourism play in this process?**

Submitted by: Leonie Wieduwilt

Student number: 21213849

**Faculty of Sustainable Economics**

**Degree Program: Sustainable Economy and Management**

First Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Alexander Conrad

Second Supervisor: Cécile Meier

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the role of networks in fostering sustainable regional development, with a particular focus on outdoor and pilgrimage paths in rural areas. Using the *St. Olav Waterway* as an example, the research explores how networking and regional connectivity contribute to economic resilience and social cohesion, essential for the sustainable growth of tourism destinations, like the Finnish archipelago. Fieldwork and interviews with local stakeholders - including community members, business owners and tourist agencies - provide insights into how outdoor and pilgrimage paths can serve as platforms for collaboration, ranging from basic cooperation between accommodations to more integrative partnerships among diverse stakeholders.

The study investigates how *slow tourism*, as a form of sustainable tourism, contributes to the creation and strengthening of networks along outdoor and pilgrimage trails. By encouraging travellers to engage deeply with the region and its local communities, slow tourism fosters connections that support sustainable regional development. These networks, encompassing social, cultural and economic relationships, are enhanced and expanded through the immersive and intentional experiences that define slow tourism.

Findings suggest that pilgrimage paths like the St. Olav Waterway present unique opportunities for rural regions to adopt a dynamic networking approach, benefiting from tourism activities that connect various islands, accommodations, and stakeholders into a cohesive network. Slow tourism emerges as a key driver in addressing challenges such as limited infrastructure and seasonal tourism peaks, thereby reinforcing the networks' potential.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainability in regional development and sustainable tourism by illustrating how networks serve as foundational assets for fostering economic resilience and social cohesion. By integrating the principles of slow tourism, these networks amplify their impact, offering a pathway toward more sustainable and inclusive regional development. The findings provide practical recommendations for policymakers and local communities in the St. Olav Waterway region, while also offering insights for other rural areas seeking integrative and sustainable approaches to tourism and regional development.

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Background and Context**

In an era characterised by the overwhelming pace of modern life and the nearly global interconnectedness, a paradoxical phenomenon has emerged: while globalisation fosters interconnectedness, many people feel increasingly isolated. This disconnection has driven a desire for slowness, mindfulness and authentic human connections, reflected in trends such as slow travel, nature retreats, and pilgrimage. These shifts highlight a societal move toward more meaningful and intentional experiences.

Amid these changes, networking has become a critical tool for regional development, particularly in rural areas. By leveraging these connections, regions can enhance their capacity to adapt to external changes, such as seasonality and limited infrastructure, and create opportunities for sustainable growth, thus fostering a sustainable regional development.

Within this context, slow tourism offers a means to strengthen networks. Unlike conventional tourism, slow tourism emphasises mindful travel, fostering deeper connections with local communities and the environment. By encouraging longer stays, local engagement, and authentic experiences, it enhances regional networks, promoting connectivity and resilience—particularly in resource-constrained rural communities.

Pilgrimage paths embody the essence of slow tourism, offering travellers immersive and reflective experiences that foster connections with local communities and natural surroundings. The St. Olav Waterway (hereinafter abbreviated as Waterway), as part of the network St. Olav Ways to Trondheim, illustrates how such paths can create meaningful engagement. Spanning 340 kilometers and linking the Finnish mainland with the Åland Islands, the trail traverses a region rich in cultural and geographical diversity. Despite challenges such as seasonal dependency, limited visibility, and geographical constraints, the Waterway presents an opportunity to foster economic resilience and social cohesion through its role as a unifying network within the Finnish archipelago.

## **1.2. Research Problem and Question**

Rural regions increasingly face economic challenges, such as declining employment opportunities, and demographic challenges, including population aging and outmigration, making tailored and sustainable regional development strategies essential to ensure long-term resilience and prosperity.

In this context, a considerable body of research focuses on sustainable regional development through social innovations and sustainable tourism, highlighting their ability to foster economic resilience, enhance cultural preservation, and promote inclusive growth, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas (Hall and Lew, 1998; Neumeier, 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; Vilela, 2019). Some of these studies place particular emphasis on the development along outdoor and pilgrimage routes, highlighting their potential to drive economic and cultural prosperity through the benefits of slow tourism and walking tourism in less-frequented destinations (Balaban and Keller, 2024; Bambi and Barbari, 2015; Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010; M. Mau and K.K. Roessler, 2024; World Tourism Organization, 2019).

While research on pilgrimage routes like the Camino de Santiago often emphasises religious, cultural, and economic dimensions (Cugini, 2021; Romanelli et al., 2021; Trono, 2022), studies on the role of networks in less explored routes, such as the St. Olav Waterway, remain scarce. Additionally, there is limited empirical evidence on how networking and collaboration benefit tourism destinations, particularly in rural, structurally weak areas. Moreover, there is limited knowledge on how slow tourism, as a form of alternative travel, can strengthen these networks, thereby contributing to a resilient local economy and enhanced social cohesion.

This study examines the state and function of networks along the Waterway, analysing their impact on economic resilience and social cohesion in the Finnish archipelago. It also explores the role of slow tourism in facilitating these networks to promote sustainable regional development. Accordingly, the research question addressed in this paper constitutes:

How do networks along outdoor and pilgrimage trails, such as the St. Olav Waterway, act as catalysts for sustainable regional development and what role does slow tourism play in this process?

### **1.3. Aims and Objectives of the Study**

This study explores the role of networks along outdoor trails as pathways for slow travel, regional connectivity, and thus potential catalysts for sustainable regional development, with a focus on fostering social cohesion and economic resilience. The thesis examines networks from a macroeconomic perspective, using the St. Olav Waterway as a case example. It investigates spatial dynamics such as regional connectivity and seasonal dependencies alongside the challenges and opportunities faced by local communities and businesses.

By analysing pilgrimage paths through the lens of slow tourism, the study demonstrates how such trails can strengthen regional networks, enhance economic resilience, and support sustainable development in rural areas.

#### **1.4. Significance and Relevance of the Study**

Studies show that outdoor trails, such as pilgrimage paths, have the potential to attract “slow” travellers, who often spend more time and money in local areas. Routes like the Camino de Santiago, Kumano Kodo in Japan, and the St. Olav Ways in Northern Europe have proven to serve as an invitation for tourists and often attract a particular group of tourists with specific values and qualities such as mindfulness, local engagement, and environmental awareness, as identified through the conducted interviews in this study. While extensive research exists on well-known pilgrimage routes in countries like Spain, Italy, and Japan, there is comparatively little focus on the Nordic countries (Grasso and Sergi, 2021; Jansson, 2021; Kato and Prozano, 2017; Kumi Kato, 2017).

Recent studies on Norwegian pilgrimage routes to the Nidaros Cathedral primarily explore topics such as religious heritage, pilgrim spirituality, and cultural tourism (Gemzöe, 2020; Lidén, 2019). However, empirical research on the broader economic and social impacts of these routes in northern Europe remains limited, particularly regarding their role in regional development and strengthening of rural areas.

This thesis seeks to address this gap by exploring how networks along outdoor trails can act as catalysts for sustainable economic development in rural areas within the Nordic context. Through fieldwork and interviews with local stakeholders, it examines the trail's bridging effects and its potential to serve as a model for sustainable tourism in rural areas. By aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) and considering the rising popularity of pilgrimage post-COVID-19 (Jansson, 2023; National Pilgrim Center of Norway, 2024) this study offers insights for policymakers and communities aiming to balance economic growth with sustainability and social cohesion.

#### **1.5. Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis aims to explore the role of networks and slow tourism in sustainable regional development. The literature review covers the foundational theories of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and slow tourism. The chapter then shifts to regional development, focusing on economic and social aspects, by introducing tools for sustainable growth and presenting the *Tourism Area Life Cycle Model* (TALC).

It also discusses the role of networks in tourism destinations, highlighting their impact on regional connectivity, community engagement, and economic growth. This section includes a case example from Norway, illustrating how networks around pilgrimage trails promote slow travel.

Chapter 3 applies the networking approach and slow tourism concepts to the St. Olav Waterway. It offers an overview of the Waterway's geographical, cultural and developmental context, placing it within the framework of the TALC model.

The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative approach, which includes fieldwork and semi-structured interviews along the Waterway, providing insights into the perspectives of local stakeholders.

The results chapter presents the key findings, focusing on themes such as the economic impact of pilgrimage tourism, local connectivity, and challenges like seasonality and infrastructure.

In the discussion, these findings are interpreted in relation to the research question, comparing them to existing literature to how networking along outdoor- and pilgrimage trails can help to foster economic resilience and social cohesion in peripheral areas, such as the Finnish archipelago.

The conclusion summarises the study's contributions, reflects on its limitations, and suggests areas for future research, particularly exploring the long-term impact of pilgrimage routes on local economies and communities.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review explores the integration of sustainability principles within the tourism sector and its implications for regional development and collaborative networks. It examines key concepts such as sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and slow tourism, alongside tools and models like the Tourism Area Life Cycle for fostering sustainable regional growth. Additionally, the review highlights the importance of networking in managing tourism destinations, with a particular focus on pilgrimage paths in Norway as an example that combines slow travel and collaborative approaches.

### 2.1 Sustainable Development within the Tourism Sector

#### 2.1.1 Definition and Principles of Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainability was first mentioned in public in the *World Conservation Strategy* (WCS) in 1980 and became popular with the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development), the latter being also known as “the first call for sustainable development” (Hall and Lew, 1998, p. 30). The commonly cited definition of sustainability goes back to the Brundtland Commission of 1987 and emphasises that development can only be sustainable when it meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 41). Accordingly, sustainable development represents the approach taken to attain sustainability.

Significant milestones for the evolution of sustainable development are the *Convention on Biological Diversity* as a result of the Rio Earth Summit (United Nations, 1992), the *Millennium Development Goals* (United Nations, 2000), and the *Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations, 2015) as part of the Paris Agreement.

The need for “sustainability transitions” (Geels, 2024) and the corresponding field of study have therefore gained increasing attention and relevance since the early 2000s (United Nations, 2000). A key focus within the study field of sustainability is the examination of systems and the critical role of time - the “speed of change” (Geels, 2024, p. 1) - in achieving meaningful progress. This urgency aligns with the 2015 Paris Agreement, where 195 countries committed to mitigating climate change by striving to limit global warming to well below 2°C, with a desirable limit of 1.5°C, relative to pre-industrial levels. (Klein et al., 2017, p. 15; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015).

It is important to point to the multidimensional nature of a sustainable development. Traditionally, the sustainability model has been presented as a three-pillar model and was introduced at the first UN sustainability conference in Rio (United Nations, 1992). This model emphasises the systemic approach and regards the three areas of ecology, economy and society as equally important. Sustainability was already seen at the time as a combination of these three pillars or as an overlap between them. Ten years later, the priority model, also known as the “eggshell model” was introduced, which shows the dependence of the economy on society and society on the environment and prioritises them accordingly (Giddings et al., 2002). This model is also referred to as strong sustainability.

However, these two models do not consider the aspect of the interplay between the individual and the environment, which led to a new sustainability model, supplemented by a fourth field: the person. After the initial extension of the priority-model by recognising the individual as an independent field, a subsequent approach was developed to express that all four areas are closely interconnected. Within the framework of the so-called “Balance-Trilogue” by D. Ernst (2020), the mutual influence and interdependence of economy, ecology, society and the individual are visualised, emphasising the need to balance these four areas in order to achieve comprehensive and holistic sustainable development. (Ernst, 2020)

*“Sustainability is achieved when all four areas are of equal size, meaning they are in balance.” (Ernst, 2020, p. 81)*

It must be noted here that the definitions of sustainability as well as the focus towards a particular area within the framework of sustainability can vary across disciplines and contexts, from more environmentally focused interpretations to broader socio-economic considerations. Thus, the focus of this study is on the social impacts and economic effects of networks along outdoor trails on sustainable regional development. The influence or effects of environmental changes are not addressed in this analysis but should by no means be overlooked in practice in order to meet the holistic requirements of sustainable development.

### ***2.1.2 Sustainable Tourism***

To better understand the role of tourism in regional development and its potential to foster economic resilience and social cohesion, it is essential to have a closer look on the concept of sustainable tourism. However, it is easy to assume that tourism and sustainability are incompatible, especially when considering mass tourism, the commercialised pilgrimage destination of *Santiago de Compostela*, or the impact of air travel on global greenhouse gas emissions, for instance. (Blom et al., 2015; Gössling and Peeters, 2007)

First of all, it can be stated that climate change is impacting the global tourism, with rising temperatures and environmental catastrophes driving more tourists to the global North (Gössling and Peeters, 2007). On the other hand, the significant contribution of the tourism sector to greenhouse gas emissions often takes a back seat, as several studies by Stefan Gössling, thought leader in the field of sustainable tourism, reveal (Gössling, 2002; Gössling et al., 2009; Gössling and Peeters, 2007). Gössling's quantification of the concrete influence of global tourism on climate change is consistent with the UNWTO report *Climate Change and Tourism: Responding to Global Challenges* as well as similar estimations, which assume that the tourism sector accounts for 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Gössling, 2002; Gössling and Peeters, 2007; United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Meteorological Organization, 2008). Until 2013, this estimation has increased up to 8% regarding to Lenzen et al. (2018), highlighting the significance of the tourism sector contributing to global greenhouse gas emissions.

The idea of sustainability within the framework of tourism dates back to the late 1980s and has been stimulated by the Brundtland report, mentioned above (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The goal was to ensure that mass tourism could coexist with positive economic, social, and environmental outcomes (Gössling et al., 2009, p. 3). The core concept of a sustainable tourism development, as Gössling et al. define it, “is the process of meeting the needs of current and future generations of tourism producers and consumers without undermining the resilience of tourism firms and the life-supporting properties or the integrity of natural and social systems on which they rely” (Gössling et al., 2009, p. 10).

Moreover, sustainable tourism is compliant with the universal *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the resulting *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), where sustainable tourism can be found under goal 8: “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (United Nations,

Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). Defined more precisely within the SDG 8.9 and 12.b., the goal is to “by 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products” as well as to “develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism” (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). At this point, the close connection between tourism, regional structures, local stakeholders, and corresponding regional development can already be seen.

In the *Charter of Sustainable Tourism (1995)*, introduced by the *World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)*, it is stated:

*“Tourism development shall be based on criteria of sustainability, which means that it must be ecologically bearable in the long term, as well as economically viable, and ethically and socially equitable for local communities. [...] As a powerful instrument of development, tourism can and should participate actively in the sustainable development strategy.” (World Tourism Organization, 1995, p. 2)*

Despite the ambitious sustainability claims and targets within the tourism industry, economic factors are usually the main driver of tourism development as Richard W. Butler, one of the best-known researchers in the field of tourism, describes in his paper (Butler, 1998, p. 29f.). For a tourism destination (e.g. ski resorts, Santiago de Compostela in Spain or the Finnish archipelago), the economic benefit plays an essential role in the preservation and development of the region in question. In some cases, mass tourism can therefore be “even more beneficial with respect to the economic environment in specific situations” (Hall and Lew, 1998, p. 32). In terms of revenue and employment, large scale tourism activities have therefore been widely promoted in order to develop and expand a tourism destination. (Hall and Lew, 1998)

Whereas mass tourism aims to concentrate tourism in specific designed areas, allowing for a better management and possible reduction in waste disposal and environmental impacts (e.g., large resorts, specific beach areas etc.), the goal of sustainable tourism usually is to spread out tourists to a wider area in order to protect areas from overuse and allocate tourists to different businesses in a region in order to strengthen regional development, community-building and resilience on a holistic level.

The UNEP Report *Making Tourism More Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers* outlines the principles of sustainable tourism, stating that “Sustainability principles point to a strategic, flexible, bottom-up approach, taking account of a wide range of economic, social and environmental factors and based on local consultation and participation” (United Nations Environment Programme, 2005, p. 84).

The focus within a sustainable tourism development can, however, vary significantly depending on the type of tourism, for instance “slow tourism”, “ecotourism”, “green tourism”, “agrotourism”, “cultural tourism”, “community-based tourism”. Whereas ecotourism, green tourism and agrotourism focus on responsible ways of travelling to natural areas, conserving the environment, and minimising the environmental impact, cultural tourism and community-based tourism focus on experiencing and preserving local cultures, traditions, arts, and heritage as well as involving local communities in managing and benefiting from tourism activities. Slow tourism, on the other hand, has the potential to combine all three sustainability aspects (economy, ecology, society) while at the same time incorporating the often-neglected role of the individual and its relation and impact on the local community. While slow tourism often incorporates eco-friendly practices, its primary focus is more on the travel experience and connection with people and place, rather than on ecological conservation. (Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010; Fennell and Cooper, 2020; United Nations Environment Programme, 2005)

The integration of sustainable travel forms holds the potential to improve social inclusiveness, build economic resilience, and support environmental protection, while also empowering host communities and promoting peace and intercultural understanding. Accordingly, sustainable tourism can be seen as “a tool for realization of sustainable development or a tool for the development of tourism itself” (Butler, 1999 in:; Kasimoglu, 2012, p. 5).

### ***2.1.3 The Concept of Slow Tourism***

Slow tourism is rooted in the *Slow Movement*, which emerged as a response to the accelerating pace of life, consumption, and the corresponding rise of fast-food chains worldwide (Balaban and Keller, 2024). The movement started in the 1980s in Italy, where fast food chains were increasingly spreading. Shortly thereafter, the “slow philosophy” (Serdane, 2020) also made its way into the tourism industry as “a different tourism choice that contributes to contrast with the negative externalities of mass tourism” (Shang et al., 2020, p. 3).

In addition to other forms of sustainable tourism, slow tourism particularly highlights the aspect of individual tourists' willingness to fully immerse themselves in the destination, engage with it and make use of regional services (Shang et al., 2020; Wondirad et al., 2021).

The systematic literature review by Balaban and Keller (2024) provides insight into the studies on slow tourism published between 2010 and 2021. The growing body of academic literature on slow tourism, spanning regions from Alaska and numerous European countries to China and New Zealand, highlights that this movement is far more than just a passing travel trend (Balaban and Keller, 2024). However, it becomes evident that slow tourism can be approached from different angles (e.g. sustainability, the COVID-19 pandemic, travel trends), making it difficult to reach a consensus on a single, unified definition. The following graphic illustrates some of the different definitions of the slow tourism concept, summarised within the work of Balaban and Keller (2024):

*Table 1: Different definitions on the concept of slow tourism*

	<b>The Concept of Slow Tourism as...</b>	<b>Source</b>
Different Definitions	...an alternative to mass tourism which focuses on sustainability and tourist experience.	Shang et al., 2020
	...an opposition to mass tourism.	Losada and Mota, 2019
	...an alternative approach to engage with sustainable tourism.	Serdane et al., 2020
	...a type of tourism that encourages tourists to take their time while traveling and engage with people and places.	Meng and Choi, 2016
	...an experience that encourages tourists to prefer slower modes of transport.	Lin et al., 2020
	...an approach to extend the length of stay in destinations.	Wondirad et al., 2021

*Own illustration adapted from Balaban and Keller (2024)*

Within their systematic literature review, the authors propose their own definition of slow tourism, based on the four-pillar model by Pecsek (2018), describing slow tourism as an “alternative type of tourism based on sustainability, which supports the preservation of local values, encourages tourists to have authentic experiences, and aims to improve the quality of life of local people” (Balaban and Keller, 2024, p. 305). The four pillars mentioned are clearly reflected in this definition, which include locality, experience-focus, sustainability, and social well-being (Pecsek, 2018). These four pillars of slow tourism emphasise the cultivation of a lasting and meaningful relationship between tourists and destinations, fostered by both tourists and locals, and driven by an authentic travel experience and a variety of tourism products (Balaban and Keller, 2024, p. 305 f.).

In contrast, interactions with locals in the broader context of mass tourism “are likely to remain superficial in character and to reinforce stereotypes rather than to create insights in other cultures” (Gössling and Peeters, 2007, p. 410).

The experiential aspect is especially significant within the concept of slow tourism. In experience marketing theory, this is referred to as the "Brand Experience," or in the tourism context, the "Destination Brand Experience" (DBE). This concept captures the emotional and authentic connection tourists develop with a destination, making it particularly relevant in marketing. A destination that markets slow tourism and thus represents a specific brand image, comprises four key dimensions: “sensation, cognition, emotion, and behavioural response” (Brakus et al., 2009; Shang et al., 2020, p. 3). These aspects can be both created and managed by the destination, representing itself as a slow tourism destination, to sustain the DBE and effectively appeal to specific target groups. (Barnes et al., 2014; Brakus et al., 2009; Shang et al., 2020)

The qualities of slow tourism, according to the study by Balaban and Keller (2024), can be well integrated into the sustainability framework and collectively contribute to "in-depth experiences" (p. 306). The slower pace of travel, the use of more sustainable transport options (such as walking or cycling), and the visit to off-the-beaten-path destinations all contribute to the environmental aspect of sustainability. Longer stays in local accommodations, the use of regional services and offerings, support the local economy. Social well-being is particularly emphasised, as slow tourism prioritises community-focused, culturally immersive activities. (Balaban and Keller, 2024)

When looking at different modes of slow transport, *walking tourism* stands out, as mentioned in a report by the *World Tourism Organization* (UNWTO). Walking, as both a means of travel and a form of tourism, has long been underestimated, as Dickinson and Lumsdon point out in their book *Slow Travel and Tourism* (2010). It is precisely through walking that the trio of social, environmental, and cultural immersion is being addressed, while promoting personal well-being (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

*“Since walking activity is attractive not only to visitors but also to residents to maintain and enhance their wellbeing, a destination can also consider it as a means of its welfare policy and promoting the integration between visitors and residents.” (World Tourism Organization, 2019, p. 9)*

The *World Tourism Organization* directly discusses the potential of walking-based tourism in terms of regional development through increased business opportunities and emphasises, in this context, the support of relevant stakeholders of the destination (World Tourism Organization, 2019, p. 10). As an additional tourism offering, walking (e.g. as part of a long-distance hike) can also help reduce the dependence on the high-season of a destination, as walking tourism is most suitable during the shoulder seasons, particularly at the edges of the peak summer months. This, in turn, extends the tourism season. In this context, the region benefits greatly from the use of public paths as long-distance hiking trails, as well as services along the route, thereby supporting the local economy by making it more resilient to seasonality. (World Tourism Organization, 2019)

In the context of walking-based tourism as a form of slow tourism, the World Tourism Organization suggests “building a network of walking routes within in a wider area [with] a coordinating organization to set common standards and to carry out common product development, branding and promotion activities” (World Tourism Organization, 2019, p. 15). The Georgia Hiking Trails, Kyushu Olle in Japan, Camino de Santiago as well as the St. Olav Ways to Trondheim area just a few examples of walking routes which create a common brand of individual hiking routes, attracting visitors by a unified DBE (Barnes et al., 2014; Pilegrimsleden, 2024; World Tourism Organization, 2019). The Camino de Santiago has, in fact, “managed to generate a linear axis of development in rural areas and small cities that the route crosses” (p. 231), according to the study by González and Lopez (in: SpringerLink, 2021).

To summarise the section on slow tourism, Shang et al., based on their review of 85 papers on the subject, highlight a "general agreement on the benefits of slow tourism for both tourists and destinations" (2020, p. 3).

## 2.2 Regional Development

### 2.2.1 Introduction to Regional Development

Regional development involves the study and application of strategies to enhance the socio-economic growth and performance of specific areas. By analysing a region's economic, social, and environmental conditions, the goal of a sustainable regional development is to formulate practical strategies aimed at fostering sustainable growth, promoting social cohesion, and building economic resilience. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

The term "region" originates from the Latin word *regio*, which derives from the word *regere*, meaning "to govern" (Sinz, 2018). Within the context of regional development, a region usually describes an "administrative division of a country" (Cooke and Leydesdorff, 2006, p. 2). From a spatial point of view, a region encompasses an area beyond the local and below the national level and can be defined as a "contiguous, medium-sized spatial subdivision that can be demarcated based on certain characteristics within an overall space" (Sinz, 2018, p. 2). Assessing a region's development involves the dimension of time and can be approached from a quantitative (e.g. number of jobs, incomes, demographic change) or qualitative (e.g. innovation, collaboration, creativity) perspective (Bærenholdt, 2009). A thorough analysis of regional development must therefore always consider both dimensions, as human action always occurs in relation to time and space (Geels, 2024).

There are several conceptual frameworks and models to describe the development of regions. The core-periphery concept, first published in 1966 by John Friedmann, remains relevant to describe spatial and economic disparities between regions. The core-periphery model illustrates the uneven distribution of socio-economic and political power, which tends to be concentrated in "core" areas, such as large, rapidly growing cities. Core regions are characterised by a high degree of industrialisation, well-developed infrastructure, and significant economic activity. In contrast, the "periphery" (less developed, rural, or resource-dependent regions) often depends on core regions for access to capital, markets, and infrastructure, highlighting the structural inequalities between these regions. (Friedmann, 1970)

The cluster model, introduced in Porter's book *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* (1990), has long served as an important conceptual foundation within the study fields of economic geography and similar fields of study. It is based on the theory of competitive advantages of specific industries gained through location-based benefits.

A cluster refers to a regional network formed by agglomeration (concentration) of small to medium-sized businesses that together create a value chain, thus forming a cohesive network. While the actors within a cluster compete in certain areas, they also collaborate in other aspects, fostering a cooperative environment. (Klett Verlag, n. d.; Porter, 1990).

The integration of the temporal dimension into the classic cluster theory is referred to as a "radical shift" (2018, p. 188) by Schmidt et al. and described within the study *From Cluster to Process* (Ibert et al., 2015). This expansion emphasises the dynamic, evolving nature of clusters, suggesting that they should be viewed as ongoing processes rather than static entities (Ibert et al., 2015).

Beyond these conceptual theories, there is a growing trend in the academic literature toward new empirical topics in regional development (Kovanen et al., 2023; Neumeier, 2012; Schmidt et al., 2018; Vilela, 2019). These often focus on innovation, particularly social innovation (SI), and the role of collaborative governance (Kovanen et al., 2023), reflecting a growing interest in understanding how collaborative approaches and innovative practices can enhance regional development strategies.

The basis of these new approaches can be traced back to Freeman's *Stakeholder Theory* (1984), which emphasises the role of various actors operating within or outside a region. Unlike the traditional shareholder model, that primarily focuses on an organisation's financial value, Freeman's perspective broadens the scope by recognising the influence and importance of multiple stakeholders in shaping regional development and value creation. (Freeman, 1984)

### ***2.2.2 Tools for Sustainable Regional Development***

Key factors influencing regional development include economic drivers like innovation and entrepreneurship, social elements such as inclusivity and cohesion, policy aspects like governance and decentralisation, and environmental priorities like sustainability and climate resilience – underscoring the complex and multidimensional nature of sustainability and a sustainable development.

As it is highlighted in the book *Sustainable Tourism: a geographical perspective* (Hall and Lew, 1998) individuals play a key role in shaping sustainable practices. Due to Hall and Lew, the much-cited concept of "thinking globally, acting locally" is closely linked and can only function if local communities play a critical role in the planning and development, emphasising the value of active stakeholder engagement (Hall and Lew, 1998, p. 34).

Just as “businesses operate in an ecosystem of various stakeholders” (Guttermann, 2023, p. 1), so do regions consists of a complex network of different stakeholders that are mutually dependent and “contribute to the sustainability of the business [or region] and the ability of the firm [or destination] to create value for any stakeholder group” (p.1) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

In this context, social innovation has emerged as an “instrument” (Vilela, 2019, p. 1) and “key element for regional development, sustainable development and more recently for rural development“ (p. 2) emphasising local engagement, the reorganisation of societal structures, and the “reinforcement to social cohesion” (p. 3). Based on a systematic review of literature about social innovations, Vilela (2019) highlights “the importance of communities as driving agents“ (Vilela, 2019, p. 19) by defining three main themes: “1) Resilience and Sustainability; 2) Governance and Rural Communities; 3) Management and Technology”, with cluster one having the highest tendency for future research (Vilela, 2019).

*“It [social innovation] is basically about the development of sustainable structures and establishing a form of balance that, on the one hand, enables innovation, creativity, new ideas and visions in action; and, on the other hand, maintains the necessary stability“*  
(Magel and Glück, 2000; in: Neumeier, 2012, p. 49).

Within his study about social innovations in rural areas, Neumeier defines the process of social innovation in three phases: *Problematisation*, where a problem or idea is identified by actors; *Expression of Interest*, as new actors are engaged and recognise the value of adopting new practices; and *Delineation and Coordination*, focused on building dynamic networks of aligned actors, enabling ongoing adaptation and sustained success through continuous inputs from new participants (Neumeier, 2012, p. 57).

This is where the concept of *collaborative governance* comes into play defined as a “process” (Kovanen et al., 2023, p. 1) in which “relevant and affected actors in networks and partnerships [...] exchange and pool resources and constructively manage their different interests, ideas and perceptions in the pursuit of joint solutions to common problems” (Sørensen and Torfing, 2023, p. 1590).

In regional development, social innovations and collaborative governance can form a synergy as SIs often emerge from collaborative governance frameworks which provide platforms for stakeholders to co-create and implement social innovations. This synergy could help to reduce inequalities by addressing challenges such as social cohesion and economic resilience. (Kovanen et al., 2023; Neumeier, 2012; Vilela, 2019)

For this synergy to work, “established, innovative and independent“ (Kovanen et al., 2023, p. 4) regional development agencies play a vital role. After examining four regional case studies in Germany, focused on the role of collaborative governance in regional development, Kovanen et al. summarise: “All public-founded regional innovation agencies focused on supporting technological and scientific knowledge-exchange and world-market leading companies, thus, blending out numerous other civic and professional networks, which might help to spread knowledge and create collaboration between locally-based small and medium-sized enterprises and activists on new and sustainable livelihood models” (2023, p. 12). The authors advocate recognising the value of civil society and networks of small- and medium-sized businesses as key drivers of social innovation, offering an alternative to growth-oriented and institutionalised power systems.

*“Collaboration could improve if public bodies created spaces for informal and critical actors to contribute.” (Kovanen et al., 2023, p. 11)*

In order to address a disconnect between bottom-up social innovation efforts and regional governance focused on economic growth, the ESCAPE project (European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions, and Perspectives for Territorial Governance) suggests a *Community-Led Local Development* (CLLD) as “an integrated, place-based, and ‘bottom up’ method bringing together local public, private and civil-society stakeholders” (ESPON, 2020, p. 19). Within this report, the relevance of EU funding for rural communities has been underlined as well as the “concept of territorial governance [...] as a holistic planning tool designed to empower the sub-national level and enhance the role of local and regional knowledge in policymaking processes” (ESPON, 2020, p. 21).

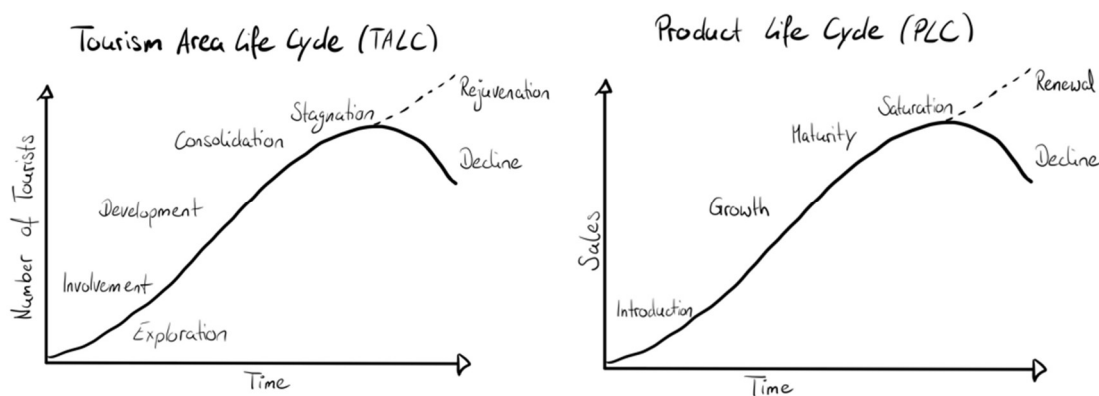
In summary, CLLD is the foundation for empowering communities, SI generates the solutions, and collaborative governance ensures the necessary partnerships and structures are in place to scale and sustain these efforts.

### 2.2.3 The Tourism Area Life Cycle Model

Butler's *Tourism Area Life Cycle Model* (TALC) provides a foundational framework to understand how tourism destinations evolve by dividing the different stages of development into six different phases: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline/rejuvenation (Butler, 1980). The individual phases are described in more detail in the chapter "3. Case Study Context" by using the *Waterway* as an example.

The TALC model is based on the premise that "resorts are essentially products, i.e. they have normally been developed and modified to meet the need of specific markets (e.g. holiday-makers) in a similar way to the production of other goods and services" (Butler, 2011, p. 4). Consequently, a tourism destination or holiday resort tend to follow pattern similar to the *Product Life Cycle* (PLC), balancing between market acceptance and rejection as well as being dependent on evolutionary changes in order to survive within a competitive tourism environment (Butler, 2011; Oberhuber and Rau, 2019).

Figure 1: Comparison of the TALC and PLC model



Own illustration based on the models by Butler (2011) and Oberhuber and Rau (2019)

However, critics argue that the TALC model is overly simplistic, assuming a linear progression through stages and thus promoting tourism expansion that goes beyond the carrying capacities of the tourist destination (Gössling et al., 2009, p. 3). Moreover, the definition of a destination's "carrying capacity" remains ambiguous, as it varies depending on the type of capacity being examined (e.g. physical, environmental or psychological capacity) (Sahli, 2020, p. 6). Despite these criticism regarding the model's simplicity and generalisation, the TALC model remains widely used and serves as a key framework within tourism studies for decision-making and destination analysis (Sahli, 2020).

## **2.3 The Role of Networks for Tourism Destinations**

### ***2.3.1 The Tourism Destination***

Just as sustainability is a highly complex issue, the tourism destination must also be viewed from a multidisciplinary approach, especially when it comes to a sustainable development of the region. There are different approaches on how to see a tourism destination, reaching from the spatial approach, the economic approach, the managerial approach to the systems approach and networking approach (Żemła, 2016). When examining the definitions of a tourism destination, it becomes evident that scholars perceive and describe tourism in various ways. Depending on the approach, a tourism destination can be viewed from various perspectives, each emphasising different aspects.

In this regard, Michał Żemła (2016), professor in tourism studies, cites various studies in his article that offer different perspectives on tourism destinations. One such perspective is the spatial approach, which views the tourism destination primarily as a geographic region, location, unit or entity visited by tourists (Burkart and Medlik, 1974; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012; Seaton and Bennett, 1996; in: Żemła, 2016). The economic approach (divided into demand side and supply side approaches) sets the focus on tourism destinations to a "Geographic area where there is a concentration of small/medium-sized companies sharing a homogeneous background" (d'Angella and Sainaghi, 2004; in: Żemła, 2016, p. 4). In addition to the managerial approach (management perspective of products, services and experiences being offered to specific target groups) and the systems approach (businesses acting within an integrated system shaping the tourism product of the destination), Żemła (2016) presents the networking approach, which will be the focus of the following sections of this paper. This approach emphasises the dynamic interrelations of various actors within an integrated and complex system. (Żemła, 2016)

When examining the various definitions and perspectives of tourism destinations, it becomes evident that the way tourism offerings are presented by researchers also varies in form. The spectrum ranges from tourism as a product (Capone and Boix, 2005), to tourism as a service (Bieger, 1998), and extends to conceptualising it as a "travel experience" (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012, p. 466).

On the one side, scholars present tourism destinations as a “place considered as a system of actors that co-operates in order to supply an integrated tourist product independent stakeholders” (Capone and Boix, 2005, p. 2) where there are “no hierarchical ties between the numerous entities that offer products independently” (Żemła, 2016, p. 6), offering “‘their’ product in a relatively non-coordinated way” (Flagestad, 2002; Żemła, 2016, p. 6).

Alternatively, one of the most accepted definitions is stated by Goeldner and Ritchie, who describe a tourism destination as “a particular geographic region within which the visitor enjoys various types of travel experiences” (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012, p. 466). This definition conceptualises tourism within a specific region as a collective of diverse activities and experiences.

Furthermore, an emphasis is put on the systemic approach of cooperating stakeholders with the definition of Baggio et al., who define tourism destinations as “complex systems, represented as a network by enumerating the stakeholders composing it and the linkages that connect them. [...] A tourism destination shares many of these characteristics, encompassing many different companies, associations, and organisations whose mutual relationships are typically dynamic and nonlinear” (Baggio et al., 2010b, p. 802).

At this point, it is interesting to take a short excursion into the research field of the *Experience Economy*, originated by Pine and Gilmore (1999), as this field of study illustrates the basic concept of tourism as an experiential event and thus distinguishes it from traditional goods, products and services. The authors point out that „[...] commodities are fungible, goods are tangible, services are intangible, experiences are memorable” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p. 11) and go on to state that “the more sensory an experience, the more memorable it will be” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p. 59).

In tourism destinations, the primary offering is often the experience itself, with its perceived value being highly subjective. According to Seohee Chang, researcher in the field of the Experience Economy in hospitality and tourism, the monetary value of experiences is frequently considered lower than the monetary cost of associated services (2018). The challenge of quantifying the financial value of experiences and understanding customers' monetary perceptions of these experiences has gained increasing attention in the fields of hospitality and tourism studies (Chang, 2018; Kim, 2014; Loureiro, 2014).

As individuals increasingly seek experiential value over tangible goods and services, scholars suggest that the customers' spending patterns align with the degree of enjoyment they perceive from experiences (Chang, 2018; Pine and Gilmore, 1999 in: ). This suggests that, based on the principles of the Experience Economy, the success of a tourism destination largely depends on the quality and enrichment of the experiences it offers to customers.

From a management perspective, tourism destinations can be categorised into vertically integrated and freely assembled types (Gnoth, 2004). Vertically integrated destinations operate as a single entity with hierarchical management, controlling most input and output parameters. In contrast, freely assembled destinations consist of numerous SMEs serving tourists. These destinations often evolve from local services (such as transport, accommodation, and hospitality) to tourism-focused offerings as attractions gain popularity. Over time, SMEs increase their revenue share from tourism, begin marketing to tourists, and specialised tourism businesses emerge, leading to intensified competition. (Gnoth, 2004)

### ***2.3.2 The Networking Approach***

In the context of regional development, the networking approach, as an intersection between economic geography and economic sciences, is particularly suitable to analyse the phenomenon of outdoor and pilgrimage trails from a management perspective and the benefits of regional networking.

*“The networking perspective might be a good solution for analysing sociological issues in destinations and the economic benefits of tourism development, as well as in examining management structures and processes, in particular planning“ (Żemła, 2016, p. 10).*

A network can be defined as “an arrangement of interorganisation, cooperation and collaboration” (Hall, 2005, p. 179). The tourism destination, being fundamentally a network industry, becomes „a place considered as a system of actors that co-operates in order to supply an integrated tourist product“ (Domenech and Capone, 2004, p. 2).

To introduce the significance and applicability of the networking approach, the previously cited Professor Michał Żemła first outlines the problems associated with the traditional economic approach and, in this context, addresses the issue of "incoherence between demand-side approach and supply-side approach" (Żemła, 2016, p. 3). The demand side approach describes how tourists perceive a tourism destination including subjective factors, such as personal experiences and own perception of the area and borders of the destination, which makes it hard to analyse or manage the marketing of the destination.

On the contrary, the supply side focuses on internal processes within established geographic or administrative boundaries. Marketing activities are usually funded by local organisations that operate within these administrative borders. The demand side, on the other hand, often perceives these boundaries differently - tourists tend to view destinations subjectively and do not necessarily define them based on administrative borders. (Żemła, 2016)

Here, the question arises as to whether a tourism destination within the tourism market should be viewed as an independent product (consistent with the demand side approach) or as a compilation of various tourism offerings (closer to the supply side approach). These differing perspectives between the supply and demand sides is what the author describes as “one of the largest contemporary challenges for destination marketers” (Żemła, 2016, p. 3).

Another reason networks are essential to tourism destinations is that many resources - both physical and intangible - are community-owned, typically managed by the local municipality, or created through the local network (Scott et al., 2008; Żemła, 2016). Even though, the role of public authorities being “responsible for delivering many important elements of a tourism destination product” (Żemła, 2016, p. 7) should not be underestimated, there is usually “no focal company in charge of the overall management of the tourism production process” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 5).

The experiences of tourists in a tourism destination are significantly shaped by the interplay of individual actors, who together form the overarching image and perception of the destination, referred to as the “destination brand” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 7) or “tourism product” (p. 2). It should be noted that it is not only the destination as a brand that relies on the individual small-and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). In his article, Gnoth highlights the particular dependence of SMEs in the tourism sector on the reputation and appeal of the overall destination brand to attract customers (2004, p. 1). The author points out that the destination brand represents the entire area and is not controlled by a single SME, which consequently has limited ability to independently enhance or reshape its own brand. Moreover, since there is typically little collaboration or influence among different businesses, the development of destination brands tends to be slow. (Gnoth, 2004)

From the perspective of demand, the perception of a tourism destination as a brand is certainly understandable, as the focus here is primarily on the presentation and experience of the region. From the supply side, however, a tourism destination is neither a single product nor a patchwork of enterprises but rather operates as a complex system of diverse actors, influenced by both external and internal factors (Bieger and Beritelli, 2013; in: Gnoth, 2004).

Viewing a destination as a system aligns most closely with a holistic, sustainable approach, as it emphasises organic growth through the self-responsibility of individual SMEs and efficient strategies for the destination as a whole to resiliently adapt to dynamic changes.

*“Tourism is experienced rather holistically and often the customer value is not derived directly from particular services but is created between the various services, as a combination of those services and the tangible and intangible assets of a given destination.”*

*(Gnoth, 2004; in: Żemła, 2016, p. 8)*

Within this system, which is viewed as its own business entity in the global tourism market, there exist individual smaller business units, the SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises). The networking approach places individual stakeholders within the tourism destination at the center of focus. SMEs (such as accommodations, businesses, tourism centers, the local population, travel agencies, etc.) are interrelated and mutually dependent and, above that, part of a greater social network that significantly shape the visitor’s experience within the region (Żemła, 2016). The relationship between stakeholders in the tourism sector can be quite complex due to co-opetition (“cooperation while competing” (Gnoth, 2004). While these businesses compete with one another to attract customers, they are also deeply interconnected and depend on each other to create a cohesive and appealing destination experience. For instance, a Bed & Breakfast may rely on local restaurants, tour operators and cultural attractions to attract tourists, while the surrounding businesses benefit from the accommodation’s ability to bring in visitors. (Gnoth, 2004)

*“Because tourism SMEs are inseparably interdependent, they require tools and structures to manage cooperation while competing.” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 2)*

Balancing this co-opetition requires effective collaboration, according to Gnoth (2004). This could include shared marketing platforms, joint destination branding initiatives, or coordinated efforts to improve visitor services. Without such mechanisms, it would be challenging for these businesses to leverage their interdependence and collectively enhance the overall appeal of the destination. According to Gnoth, “[s]uccessful destinations have SMEs interacting more frequently both at a formal and an informal level, than less successful destinations, involving communications concerning external destination marketing” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 3).

Formal and informal communication between individual SMEs is also crucial for the internal functioning of a tourism destination, also referred to as “value chain” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 9).

This is because one service provider (e.g., a ferry operator) typically lacks knowledge about the next provider in the chain, making it difficult for the “service chain” to operate smoothly. As Gnoth explains, “the individual SME manager cannot ‘see’ nor control the ‘path,’ i.e., the production process and place, as it is hidden from view once the tourist leaves his premises” (2004, p. 4).

Because the SME manager cannot directly observe the tourist’s journey through the destination and must rely on various other “channel members” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 4), tourists “beat a path” (p.4) and construct their own “value chain” (p. 4). In doing so, they create the product of their journey while acting as transactional communicators between the different enterprises. The individual SMEs on the other hand are presenting the destination as a unified “brand” and therefore must be aware of shared goals practices and brand attributes in order to meet the expected price and quality. (Gnoth, 2004)

“Cooperative planning and organisational activities” is what Baggio et al. describe as the “basic premise of tourism destination management” (2010a; in: Żemła, 2016, p. 7). Networking, in that sense, can serve as an effective means of communication and collaboration among independent entities in tourism destinations that are characterised by a lack of hierarchical structures among different stakeholders. This approach allows individual enterprises within a tourism destination to coexist and possibly benefit from each other, replacing a “chaotic, non-coordinated development of tourism supply” (Żemła, 2016, p. 6).

To promote sustainable regional development, destination managers should prioritise the entire value chain that shapes tourists' experiences, rather than viewing tourism merely as a product to attract visitors, according to Gnoth (2004).

*“Whereas a manufactured product reaches the consumer at the end of the channel, tourists’ needs and demands are satisfied along the path, as well as overall.” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 5)*

This raises the question of how to effectively organise and manage a tourism destination where the tourist experience is shaped by various individual stakeholders that together build a value chain, the perceived destination brand (e.g. ambience, atmosphere, opportunities, quality etc.). Gnoth suggests to conceive destinations as a virtual service firm (VSF) since it aligns with the core attributes of a tourism destination being a “network of enterprises, which are using resources jointly and which organize their cooperation in a joint effort” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 5).

Within the concept of virtual firms, there is no focal company but rather consists of the integrated contribution of each SME within the region (Gnoth, 2004). This means that knowledge about the destination brand as a whole, its attributes, processes and shared goals becomes a resource shaping the appearance of the destination and can therefore be seen as a driving force for the further development of the region as a tourism destination. (Gnoth, 2004)

Gnoth (2004) highlights several advantages of conceptualising tourism destination as virtual service firms. This perspective provides structure and substance to the destination as a strategic business unit (SBU) by recognising a unified product attribute beyond the functional services of SMEs. It enables effective management, including identifying necessary skills and processes, conducting targeted customer research, and analysing competitors. Additionally, product and market intelligence derived from this approach can enhance competitive advantages. Unlike virtual manufacturing firms, where a focal company coordinates participants, management in virtual tourism firms is often passive, as tourists independently assemble their experiences at the destination (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012).

*“The way the destination networks develop may have a substantial influence on this atmosphere and how it affects the growth of the destination.” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 6)*

### **2.3.3 Pilgrimage Paths in Norway as an arena for Slow Travel and Networking**

Pilgrimage in Norway has been officially permitted again since 1994, following the revitalisation of the *St. Olav Ways - The Pilgrim Paths to Trondheim* (Pilegrimsleden, 2024). This initiative was part of a broader European effort to revive historical pilgrimage routes. It aligns with the growing interest in walking pilgrimages, particularly those inspired by the Camino de Santiago, attracting both local and international pilgrims.

In fact, pilgrimage in Norway has been increasing by 20 % annually, according to the study about a sustainable development of pilgrimage trails by Mattias Jansson from the National Pilgrimage Center of Norway (Jansson, 2021). From 2021 to 2022, the number of pilgrims in Norway even tripled, assuming that many people who were unable to travel abroad due to restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic turned to pilgrimage routes within their own country, resulting in a significant increase in pilgrim numbers. Furthermore, even after the pandemic, there continues to be a pilgrimage boom on Norwegian pilgrimage routes. (Jansson, 2023)

All St. Olav Ways together form a network of over 5,000 kilometers through Northern Europe, all of them having the Nidaros Cathedral as their final destination and being historically linked to Saint Olav. In Norway, over 2,500 kilometers are marked with the St. Olav logo (a Norwegian landmark and red cross), comprising nine routes (namely Gudbrandsdalsleden, St.Olavsleden, Østerdalsledene, Romboleden, Valldalsleden, Kystpilegrimsleia, Nordleden, Borgleden and Tunsbergsleden) that together form the Norwegian pilgrimage network. Five of the Norwegian St. Olav routes are part of the international network of *The Cultural Route of St Olav Ways* by the European Commission (Cultural Routes, 2024).

A special feature in Norway is the state-funded and centrally organised network, which is divided into a National Pilgrim Center and 12 regional pilgrim centers. Whereas the National Pilgrim Center coordinates the Norwegian pilgrimage network as well as maintains and develops the international network of St. Olavs Ways, the regional centers focus on networking and cooperating within their specific area, making sure to include various stakeholders such as local businesses, the municipality, cultural institutions, organisations, voluntaries in order to create a cohesive social network and spread the word about pilgrimage.

In Norway, pilgrimage has demonstrated its value as a re-socialisation activity for prisoners, providing a pathway to reconnect with society. It allows individuals to transcend their backgrounds and unite under the shared identity of "pilgrims" (The word "pilgrim" originates from the Latin term *peregrinus*, which is derived from *per ager*, meaning "over the field," and was used to describe a foreigner or traveller). (Alt et al., 2013)

Additionally, the maintenance of the pilgrimage paths, including signage and the provision of services such as accommodations, falls under the responsibility of the regional centers. They ensure that the overall appearance (the destination brand) is consistently presented along each route and that individual SMEs within the network are included. This coordination guarantees a unified appearance, a consistent level of professionalism and helps shape the overall identity of the Norwegian pilgrimage network.

In his master's thesis, Jansson discusses the impact of pilgrimage routes on sustainable development (2021). However, he emphasises when viewed from a broader, macro perspective, arriving by airplane at the starting point of a pilgrimage contradicts the principles of sustainability (p. 48). This highlights the complexity of sustainability and the challenges of categorising pilgrimage tourism within the sustainability framework.

However, on a social level, the strong sense of connection fostered through collaborative partnerships within Norway's national pilgrimage network is evident. Together, these partnerships create a unified and cohesive tourism experience. (Jansson, 2021)

An example of this strong networking approach are the annual meetings of all pilgrimage accommodations within a specific region (organised by the 12 regional pilgrim centers individually), where the centers update the accommodations on shared goals, values, and strategies. In recent years, pilgrimage tourism has also gained national attention in Norwegian media (NRK, 2024), underscoring the visibility of the pilgrimage network and demonstrating its value not only at the regional level but also in the context of the national pilgrimage strategy, established in the national pilgrimage statute (Norwegian Ministry of Culture, 2012).

With its structured approach to the Norwegian pilgrimage network, supported by the government and local organisations, Norway offers a compelling example of an integrated tourist experience along the St. Olav Ways. Norway's pilgrimage routes embody the principles of slow tourism, that have been explained above. Slow tourism, characterised by a focus on local experiences, slow travel, and social engagement, is deeply integrated into these routes. Pilgrims traveling along the St. Olav Ways move at a leisurely pace, often walking several hours each day and staying in local accommodations, which supports the regional economy and fosters a deeper connection with the surrounding environment. Through this combination of well-coordinated infrastructure and a focus on social cohesion and immersive travel, Norway exemplifies the integration of modern tourism with deep-rooted traditions.

### 3. Case Study Context

#### 3.1 The St. Olav Waterway: Project Overview

The St. Olav Waterway (hereinafter abbreviated as *Waterway*), as a relatively new trail within the network of St. Olav Ways to Trondheim (the Nordic equivalent to the Camino de Santiago in Spain and Portugal), connects the Finnish mainland with the Åland islands in the Baltic Sea. The trail is part of the EU's cultural routes network and was officially opened in 2019.

The St. Olav Waterway was initiated as a project in collaboration with eight partners (Åbo Akademi (coordinator), Novia University of Applied Sciences, the town of Pargas, the municipality of Sottunga, the association Franciskus på Kökar, the Pilgrimstid association, the municipality of Östhammar, and the municipality of Söderhamn). The project, which ran for four years (September 2016- March 2020), was largely funded (75%) by the EU through the Interreg Central Baltic programme.

In 2018, the route was incorporated into the network of the Route of St. Olav Ways and has since been certified as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe. In this context, the Olav Routes in Finland association was established to join the umbrella association ACSOW ("Association for the Cultural Route of St. Olav Ways") and to ensure the maintenance of the route as an official European Cultural Route even after the four-year project concluded. (Association for the Route of St. Olav Ways, n. d.)

The primary goal of the project was to mark and map the entire route, spanning 625 kilometers from Turku (Finland) to Söderhamn (Sweden). As part of the St. Olav Ways network leading to Trondheim, the pilgrimage route can be continued in Sweden and Norway. This allows pilgrims to follow the St. Olav Ways for a total of 1,200 kilometers from Turku to Trondheim (Norway), the resting place of St. Olav and thus one of the most significant pilgrimage destinations in Northern Europe.

After the initial project period ended in September 2020, a new initiative titled *St. Olav Waterway – Development of Cultural Tourism* was launched for an additional two years (2020–2022), funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. Following the conclusion of this project period, no further official projects were initiated to support the Waterway. (St Olav Waterway, n.d.b)

### 3.2 Historical Background

The route follows the path that pilgrims travelled by foot or by sea in the Middle Ages to reach Trondheim (then known as *Nidaros*). As part of the international network of St. Olav Ways, the historical connection to the Norwegian Viking king Olav Haraldsson is particularly significant and also explains the cultural link between the various St. Olav routes leading to Trondheim.

When Christianity was spreading in Scandinavia in the early first millennium, King Olav of Norway sought to unite his land and transform the individual kingdoms into a Christian state with its own legislation. Through his many travels and Viking raids, Olav got inspired by the European mainland. For example, he learned in Normandy how a modern king rules his country and consequently introduced a common legislation in Norway, which granted more rights to the people. He also aimed to unify the country through Christianity, that brought more widespread education (reading, writing, and understanding the tax system). In 1028, he had to flee from his opponents to Novgorod (Russia). On his way back to Norway one year later, he is believed to have sailed through the Finnish archipelago (the same route followed by the present-day St. Olav Waterway). However, on July 31, 1030, he died at the Battle of Stiklestad (north of Trondheim), before he could realise his plan to rule over a unified Christian Norway. Olav was buried at the site where the Nidaros Cathedral would later be built. (Pilgrimsleden, n. d.; St Olav Waterway, n. d.a)

A year after his death, Olav was canonised as a saint, and pilgrims began to travel to Nidaros (nowadays the city of Trondheim), which became Northern Europe's most important pilgrimage destination. Pilgrimage was banned during the Lutheran Reformation (16<sup>th</sup> century, in the early 1530s) but was revived in the 1980s. The cult of Saint Olav was not only a common link between the Nordic countries in the Middle Ages but also helped strengthen a shared identity. Even today, there are many Olav churches across Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Olav is the patron saint of Åland as well the oldest Saint in the Nordic countries. (Pilgrimsleden, n. d.; St Olav Waterway, n. d.a)

Olav himself did not travel like a modern-day pilgrim, but mostly by ship. In this context, one interviewee on the Waterway mentioned that "pilgrimage is not about walking, but about traveling" (Interview 5, conducted on 16.05.2024).

### 3.3 Development of the St. Olav Waterway

To assess the current stage of development of the Waterway and better position the destination from a tourism perspective, Butler's previously introduced TALC model will be applied to categorise the development process. For this purpose, the six stages of the model (Exploration, Involvement, Development, Consolidation, Stagnation, and finally either Rejuvenation or Decline) will be applied to the case of the Waterway. This approach will help approximate its current stage of development.

1. **Exploration:** In this phase, the region is visited by a small number of adventurous tourists (e.g., pilgrims) who explore new paths and natural attractions. The volume of visitors is still very low, as the route is neither marked nor organised. The period before the start of the project in 2016 can thus be described as the exploration phase.
2. **Involvement:** During the project phase (2016–2020), the Waterway was in the involvement stage. The marking of the route, mapping, and integration into the St. Olav Ways network laid the foundation for attracting more pilgrims and tourists. Accommodations and other services began to hear about the route and started offering pilgrim-specific services.
3. **Development:** If the Waterway is successfully promoted and cultural events, accommodations, and services continue to evolve, it could move into the development stage, leading to a significant increase in tourist demand in the region. This, in turn, would result in the expansion of infrastructure. The inclusion in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe network has the potential to drive the region forward in this process.
4. **Consolidation:** In this phase, growth stabilises, and the region becomes an established tourist destination. Standardised offerings are developed to meet the needs of a large number of tourists. The Waterway has likely not yet reached this phase, as it has not experienced significant tourism stabilisation following the conclusion of the second project (2022) and the lack of further official funding.
5. **Stagnation:** Without continuous maintenance and further development, the Waterway could enter a stagnation phase. At this point, demand has reached its peak, and the region can no longer grow without making significant changes.

6. **Rejuvenation or Decline:** In the rejuvenation phase, the region is revitalised through new investments, innovations, or a transformation. In contrast, during decline, it loses its significance as a tourist destination. The long-term success of the Waterway depends on its sustainable maintenance and the commitment of local stakeholders. There is a risk of decline if no new funding or initiatives are introduced to promote the route, or if local stakeholders fail to recognise its potential for regional development along the Waterway.

Based on the TALC model, it can be assumed that the St. Olav Waterway is currently between the involvement and development stages. The previous projects have laid the groundwork, and local stakeholders are increasingly recognising the route, which can serve as an invitation for tourists to visit the region and connect the various accommodations and businesses along the way. However, without continued support and an expanded regional network of cooperating stakeholders, there is a risk that development could stagnate or even decline.

### **3.4 Economic and Geographical Significance**

Located in the Baltic Sea between the Finnish and Swedish mainland, the Waterway can be viewed as both a border-crossing and a connecting route. The approximately 340 km from Turku to Eckerö (Åland), from where the ferry to Sweden can be taken, pass through the Finnish archipelago, which is why the route is also marketed as "Island Hopping through the Finnish Archipelago" (St Olav Waterway, 2023).

The Finnish archipelago is a multifaceted region and therefore hard to categorise within the core-periphery-model by Friedmann (1970). From an economic perspective, the distance to core economic activities and the dependence on seasonal activities like tourism and fishing, which are less stable compared to industrial or urban economic hubs, clearly shows the peripheral nature of the archipelago region. The fragmented geography of islands presents challenges for transportation, connectivity, and economic integration with mainland Finland. Economic sustainability in terms of resilience and independence of the high season is therefore particularly important for the Finnish archipelago as a tourism destination while socio-cultural sustainability has often been overlooked from an administrative point of view, as the case study by Renfors (2021) reveals.

In contrast to pilgrimage in Norway, which is largely funded by the Norwegian government through investments in the development of national pilgrimage tourism, the St. Olav Waterway was financed through project-based funding, such as that from Interreg Baltic Sea. (St Olav Waterway, 2023; Pilegrimsleden, 2024)

When compared to the large-scale influx of visitors to the Camino de Santiago, which attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year, the number of pilgrims on the St. Olav Ways is much smaller. Depending on the country and specific route, the St. Olav Ways see between approximately 200 pilgrims on the St. Olav Waterway and just under 1,000 pilgrims on the Gudbrandsdalsleden in Norway. (Jansson, 2023)

Key differences between the Camino de Santiago and the St. Olav Ways in the Nordic countries have been summarised by Alt et al. (2013). According to these authors, the Camino Ways benefit from a well-established infrastructure and a strong emphasis on its destination as a major tourist attraction. The accommodations and dining options along the Camino are generally affordable (ranging from €5 to €35 per night), though this affordability is often reflected in the relatively low quality of services and food, which is not necessarily locally sourced. It can be assumed that mass tourism may have contributed to the development of the Camino's current structure. In contrast, the Olav Ways in the Nordic countries prioritise locality, high-quality products and services, with a closer connection between pilgrims and accommodations, which are often family-owned or small- to medium-sized businesses. Accommodations along the Olav Ways, however, are generally more expensive, typically ranging from €50 to €100 per night. (Alt et al., 2013)

### **3.5 The destination as a network of independent stakeholders**

The region surrounding the Waterway aligns well with the concept of a “freely assembled destination” (Gnoth, 2004, p. 3), based on Gnoth's categorisation of tourism destination in vertically integrated and freely assembled destinations. According to Gnoth, a freely assembled destination is characterised by a network of independent stakeholders, often small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), that collaborate without a hierarchical structure to form a cohesive tourist offering.

The destination comprises a variety of independently operated accommodations, restaurants, ferry services, and cultural attractions scattered across the Finnish archipelago. These businesses operate autonomously, each catering to their own clientele while collectively contributing to the appeal of the archipelago as a tourism destination.

There is no governing authority or centralised management overseeing the coordination of services, which is typical for a freely assembled destination. Instead, informal networks and collaborations among stakeholders drive the development and maintenance of the route.

This decentralised structure allows for flexibility and individuality among the involved SMEs, but it also poses challenges. The lack of a hierarchical framework can make coordinated marketing and strategic development more difficult, particularly when it comes to addressing shared goals, such as increasing the visibility of the Waterway or improving infrastructure. Local stakeholders must rely on voluntary cooperation to ensure the destination remains attractive and accessible to tourists and pilgrims alike.

The freely assembled nature of the Waterway region emphasises the importance of grassroots initiatives and community engagement in sustaining the route as a viable tourism product. While this approach fosters creativity and independence, it also requires significant effort to align the interests of diverse actors to maintain a coherent destination identity.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative empirical approach to examine how networks along outdoor and pilgrimage trails, such as the St. Olav Waterway, serve as catalysts for sustainable regional development, with a particular focus on the role of slow tourism in facilitating this process. The study focuses on understanding the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders along the Waterway, using a combination of fieldwork and semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> as the primary data collection methods.

### 4.2 Data Collection Methods

A field trip to Finland was undertaken in May 2024 as a central component of this research and inspiration for the concrete research question. During the 10-days field trip, the St. Olav Waterway was travelled on foot from Turku to Mariehamn (Åland), allowing for an immersive understanding of the route and the surrounding region. This approach enabled direct engagement with the landscape, local businesses and communities, facilitating a more nuanced understanding about the role of the Waterway in strengthening regional networking and fostering economic resilience for small and medium-sized businesses in the Finnish archipelago.

A key part of the field trip consisted of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders, primarily involving face-to-face discussions with hosts of accommodations visited along the Waterway. For this purpose, interview appointments were arranged in advance with the individual stakeholders, which also gave the trip a structure and a rough schedule. Additionally, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including:

- The project manager of the St. Olav Waterway Project, offering a strategic perspective on the goals and challenges of the initiative
- Representatives from the regional tourism center of Pargas (*Visit Pargas*), providing insight into the regional tourism strategy
- Two CEOs of outdoor travel agencies (Nordic Pilgrim; Waytrails), contributing views on the economic opportunities and challenges related to outdoor tourism in the area

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<sup>1</sup> Additional information regarding the interview participants can be obtained from the author as well as the examiners of this thesis.

While most interviews were conducted in person (12 out of 14 interviews), a couple of interviews were conducted via online meetings in the aftermath of the trip, ensuring that perspectives from key stakeholders were included even when in-person meetings were not possible.

In this research, the methods of conducting fieldwork and interviews with Waterway-related stakeholders was established before a specific research question had been fully developed. This approach allowed for a more exploratory phase, where the on-the-ground interactions helped to refine and focus the research topic. The coherent structure of the interviews, which consistently centered around the theme of regional development along the Waterway, facilitated the process of identifying key topics and sub-themes<sup>2</sup>. This iterative process was essential in refining the research focus, ensuring that the study remained deeply connected to the contextual realities of the region

Each interview was structured around three focus areas:

1. **Cooperation** between accommodations
2. **Connectivity** and level of networking in the region (existing networks, local food supply etc.)
3. Level of **professionalism** of the business (stage of development and carrying capacities)

This flexible approach helped guiding the conversation while giving interviewees the freedom to share their thoughts in a more natural and expansive way. The interviews were also framed by two opening and two closing questions, designed to deepen the understanding of interviewees' attitudes towards pilgrimage and the Waterway as well as their cultural ties with both Finland and Sweden.

#### **Questions at the beginning of the interview:**

- What is your relation to the St. Olav Waterway and to pilgrimage in general?
- How would you estimate the relevance of pilgrims / people travelling the Waterway for your business?

#### **Questions at the end of the interview:**

- How and where do you perceive the border between Finland and Sweden (geographically, culturally, linguistically)?

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<sup>2</sup> The structure of the interviews can be found in the appendix of this thesis.

- Do you see potential in developing the Waterway as an outdoor trail through the Finnish archipelago? What are your wishes?

These framing questions were particularly important given the Waterway's location between the Finnish and Swedish mainland, offering a unique cultural and historical perspective.

The interviews initially served as a way to familiarise the researcher with the subject matter and assess to what extent the Waterway is already recognised by the local population or seen as an invitation for tourists to visit the region. Over time, the value of these interviews became more apparent, revealing a "socially, linguistically and subjectively rich and complex situation" (Alvesson, 2011, p. 152) while providing insights into the nature of local dynamics and the status quo in the development of the region.

The specific intention of the interviews conducted on-site was to get a deeper insight into the realities of the region, uncovering not only the challenges faced by local businesses and communities but also their aspirations and ideas for leveraging the Waterway as a catalyst for regional growth and connectivity. The interviews aimed to explore whether and to what extent a network exists between stakeholders - such as accommodations, tourism operators, and other entities along the Waterway - in order to understand the degree of cooperation and collaboration among the different actors. Additionally, the study sought to uncover how the connectivity between these stakeholders could be leveraged to strengthen regional development and foster economic benefits through the outdoor trail.

### **4.3 Data Analysis Approach**

In order to analyse the findings gathered within 14 different interviews, this study uses the metaphor approach by Alvesson (2011) as a method to analyse interviews in a more insight gathering way rather than a traditional data collection method. The most common way to analyse data from interviews is to codify and categorise them into different themes. However, this technically oriented approach tends to be "weak on theory and reflexivity" (Alvesson, 2011, p. 141). Instead of finding patterns and categories to make use of the raw interview material as "solid building blocks for knowledge production" (Alvesson, 2011, p. 59), Alvesson suggests to critically access and question the material gained in interviews. He therefore introduces a "[q]ualitative interpretation work, in which critical questioning and reflection are basis ingredients, [and] goes beyond data management and sorting, with its empiristic leaning" (Alvesson, 2011, p. 59).

To make use of this qualitative approach to critically analyse interviews, it is crucial to identify the perspective, the researcher can adopt when approaching interviews (different views or stances), as different positions can produce different interview outcomes.

Each of these positions offers a different way of thinking about the nature of interviews, the role of the interviewer and interviewee, and how knowledge is produced through interviews. In the following chart, the three different epistemological positions by Alvesson have been summarised based on Qu and Dumay (2011):

*Table 2: Different interview perspectives*

<b>Position</b>	<b>Key Focus</b>	<b>Role of Interviewer</b>	<b>Nature of Knowledge</b>	<b>Critique</b>
<b>Neopositivism</b>	Objectivity and fact-finding	Neutral, minimises influence	Reflects objective reality	Ignores social dynamics, oversimplifies
<b>Romanticism</b>	Authenticity and depth	Builds rapport, creates trust	Reveals true feelings/experiences	Overly idealistic, assumes transparency
<b>Localism</b>	Context and interaction	Active participant, co-constructs meaning	Context-bound and situational	Can be overly relativistic, hard to generalise

*Own illustration based on Qu and Dumay (2011, p. 241)*

While the neopositivist approach sees the “interview-as-technique-for-getting-data” (Alvesson, 2011, p. 151), the romanticist approach emphasises building trust and rapport to encourage authentic sharing of thoughts and experiences. However, it can be overly idealistic, overlooking how interviewees may shape their responses based on context and the interviewer’s presence. In contrast, the localist perspective views interviews as socially constructed and context-specific interactions, highlighting how the setting, interviewer and interviewee dynamics influence the content. (Alvesson, 2011)

The interview approach within this study prioritises understanding interviewees' experiences as “human encounters” (Qu and Dumay, 2011, p. 241) rather than merely as a “tool for collecting data” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 16). Both the romanticist and localist perspectives shaped the interview dynamics, with the personal connection of the former and the context-driven insights of the latter being central to understanding the interviewees' experiences within this

study. Despite being pre-arranged, interviewees were often unaware of the interviewer's aims, shaping their responses based on perceived expectations. Thus, the localist perspective takes precedence, providing a nuanced lens to interpret interview material.

Alvesson's metaphor approach is central to interpreting interviews as sensemaking devices. Metaphors are used to identify sub-themes and perspectives within the interviews, emphasising how people make sense of their experiences and perceive their world. Contrary to the common "pipeline" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 30) metaphor that views interviews as tools to extract raw data (cf. Alvesson, 2003), Alvesson proposes treating interview material as a "critical dialogue partner [that is] mobilized to 'say something'" (Alvesson, 2011, p. 71).

Metaphors transfer meaning from one system to another, illuminating some aspects while obscuring others (Alvesson, 2011, p. 62). Due to Alvesson's methodological approach, there are eight distinct metaphorical functions used by interviewees: local accomplishment, story-line perpetuation, identity work, cultural script application, impression management, political action, construction work and discourse power play (Alvesson, 2003).

Table 3 summarises these eight metaphors along with key issues and responses across the three paradigms - Neopositivism, Romanticism, and Localism - as condensed from Alvesson (2003). This approach highlights the importance of reflexivity and careful interpretation of language, particularly metaphors, in qualitative interview analysis.

In the analysis section of this paper, Alvesson's metaphors will be employed to interpret how interviewees articulate their perspectives related to the Waterway. By using Alvesson's metaphors, a reflective and open-minded interpretation of the interview material is encouraged, providing a rich, interpretive toolkit to uncover deeper meanings behind individual experiences. As Alvesson explains, "[r]eflexivity stands for conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles and avoid or strongly a priori privilege a single, favored angle and vocabulary" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 25).

Table 3: Alvesson's eight metaphors to analyse qualitative interviews

<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Key Issue</b>	<b>Response across Paradigms</b>
<i>Local Accomplishment</i>	Interview being a localised event; constructed in a specific setting	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Denial - managed through strict procedures <b>Romanticism:</b> Partial denial - managed with empathy <b>Localism:</b> Acknowledged as a key feature of interviews
<i>Perpetuating a Storyline</i>	Reproducing a particular storyline; need for sensemaking	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Denial - managed through strict procedures <b>Romanticism:</b> Partial acknowledgment - managed with openness <b>Localism:</b> Partially outside scope; involves interviewee sensemaking
<i>Identity Work</i>	Adoption of identity position(s)	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Denial - researcher controls identity <b>Romanticism:</b> Encourages authentic self-expression <b>Localism:</b> Acknowledged as a study object
<i>Cultural Script Application</i>	Social and cultural expectations; adopting certain narratives	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Partial denial - countered with structured questions <b>Romanticism:</b> Risk minimised through empathetic interaction <b>Localism:</b> Acknowledged as a study object
<i>Impression Management / Moral storytelling</i>	Strategic nature of communication; self-promotion; legitimacy	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Partial denial - countered with structured questions <b>Romanticism:</b> Risk reduced with honesty-focused techniques <b>Localism:</b> Acknowledged but difficult to study
<i>Political Action</i>	Reflecting or reinforcing political orientations	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Denial <b>Romanticism:</b> Risk minimised through interview techniques <b>Localism:</b> Excluded, assumes interests not directly observable
<i>Construction Work</i>	ambiguity of language	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Denial - inconsistent with this paradigm <b>Romanticism:</b> Denial - assumes consistent meaning <b>Localism:</b> Acknowledged as a study object
<i>Play of the Powers of Discourse</i>	Interviewees shaped by and shaping discourse	<b>Neopositivism:</b> Denial <b>Romanticism:</b> Denial - outside the paradigm's assumptions <b>Localism:</b> Excluded, assumes macro-power dynamics

Own illustration adapted from Alvesson (2003)

#### **4.4. Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the perspectives surrounding the Waterway, it is important to acknowledge several ethical limitations.

Firstly, the interview sample is limited to 14 different perspectives, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and viewpoints related to the Waterway. The small sample size raises concerns about the potential exclusion of certain voices, which could limit the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of the findings.

Additionally, the subjective nature of qualitative interviews means that personal biases, perspectives, and interpretations inevitably shape the data collected. While the interviews offer rich, context-specific insights, they may lack the objectivity and accuracy when it comes to numerical data and factual precision, outlined by the interviewees. This could raise questions about the reliability and generalisability of the results beyond the specific participants and geographical context of the study. Researchers must be mindful that the interviews reflect the experiences and views of the individuals involved rather than an absolute, objective truth.

In Alvesson's words, this empirical field trip can be "seen as a 'mini-seminar' offering ideas and analytical help [...]" (Alvesson, 2011, p. 146).

Ethically, it is also important to consider the potential impact of timing of the fieldwork. Since the fieldtrip and interviews conducted on-site took place in May 2024 outside the peak tourist season, the data collected may not accurately represent the full range of experiences during peak tourist periods. The findings, therefore, may be limited in their ability to capture the complete range of stakeholders' perspectives or the current state of tourism development in the Finnish archipelago, especially if seasonal fluctuations significantly affect stakeholders' perceptions and experiences.

Finally, it is important to state that this study focuses specifically on the Finnish archipelago and the municipality of Åland. This geographical focus limits the external validity of the findings and any claims made about the broader applicability of the study's insights should be viewed with caution.

In sum, while the research provides valuable qualitative data, it is important to recognise the ethical limitations related to sample size, subjectivity, seasonal timing and regional scope when interpreting the results.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Observations during the Field Trip

The field trip was conducted during an internship at the Nidaros Pilegrimsgård (Trondheim, Norway) as part of the researcher's study program *Sustainable Economy and Management*. The trip was funded through an EU Interreg program, with coordination and support provided by the Pilgrim Centre in Trondheim. The planning for the trip was entirely self-organised, with the official website of the *St. Olav Waterway* (St Olav Waterway, 2023) and the interactive map from the *VisitPargas* tourism office (Simpson, 2023) serving as key resources that facilitated the planning of the long-distance hike. In preparation for the trip, arrangements were made with all accommodations to secure lodging and schedule interview appointments on-site.

In May 2024, the trip to the Finnish archipelago was undertaken and the St. Olav Waterway was travelled on foot over 10 days, starting from Turku (Finland) and ending in Mariehamn (Åland, Finland). The primary goal of this journey was to explore the Waterway and conduct fieldwork on-site as well as to strengthen its connection and visibility within the international network of *St. Olav Ways to Trondheim* (see: Pilegrimsleden, 2024).

The general accessibility and maintenance of the trail can be summarised by stating that the trail was both easy to find and easily accessible with well-marked signage along almost the entire route (with a few exceptions where the correct path was nevertheless easily identified with the help of an outdoor app). The terrain of the trail is predominantly flat and changes from urban tarmac roads (e.g. Turku city) to stretches along tarmac roads across the islands (most of the trail) to forest paths and less frequented stretches off the main road through the archipelago.

The infrastructure along the route is primarily designed for car and commuter traffic, with public, free ferries and a well-developed main road connecting the islands. Additionally, buses run at regular intervals to provide access to the city of Turku (however, the schedules and frequency of public transport vary depending on the season). On certain stretches (sometimes spanning several kilometers), there is a lack of designated cycling and pedestrian paths, meaning that walkers and cyclists must often travel along the roadside, frequently being passed by cars at regular intervals, corresponding to the ferry schedules.

During the field trip in May, no other hikers were seen along the outdoor trail, and the accommodations were largely empty, suggesting a later start to the tourist season.

Nevertheless, there was noticeable activity and general engagement among the hosts of the accommodation, often welcoming guests over the weekend and were likely preparing for the start of the tourist season in July. Several accommodations were found to be in various stages of development, some of which having just opened a couple of years ago and others being established family-owned businesses that have been run for several generations. Most of the accommodations could be classified as Bed & Breakfasts, although two of them clearly met hotel-quality standards. Except for one accommodation with self-check-in, all hosts provided a personal welcome and were eager to engage in a conversation, sometimes lasting for several hours, sharing insights about their business and connection to the Waterway.

Regarding the visibility of the outdoor trail, aside from the signage along the path, the following observation was made: Physical information, such as maps and brochures, as well as pilgrim stamps, were provided at the pilgrim center in Turku at the Turku Cathedral, where visitors could also receive personal advice from the staff. Apart from this official location, no connection to the Waterway could be found at the accommodations and small businesses along the trail. Neither maps, informational materials, nor signs indicating pilgrim accommodations - such as those commonly found in Norway and Sweden (see figure 2) - were available.



*Figure 2: Sign posting at a pilgrim hotel in Trondheim, Norway*

Particularly noteworthy, especially in terms of regional and interregional connectivity of the islands, is the distinct difference noticeable from the Åland Islands onward. Although officially part of Finland, the autonomous Åland Islands show minor but obvious differences to the rest of the Finnish archipelago. Starting with the red roads and distinctive car license plates, continuing with the barren landscape characterised by hilly sandstone formations, and extending to the noticeable cultural proximity to Sweden, Åland presents itself in a distinctly different way compared to the previously explored part of the Finnish archipelago. The Swedish language is ubiquitous in Åland and, unlike in the beginning of the journey in Turku, Finnish is rarely heard here.

Additionally, the residents of the Finnish islands seem to rarely take trips to Åland – and vice versa. This observation was further emphasised by the presence of a single participant coming from the Åland Islands during the “Meet & Greet” stakeholder event on the island of Korpo in October 2024.

Generally, accommodations and small businesses seem to operate rather independently, each focusing on their own operations and clientele. Their interactions are limited to remote knowledge of one another, which means they can recommend each other to guests, often based on hearsay or indirect acquaintance. Nonetheless, some connections between the accommodations and local producers were already noticeable. For example, a local farmer delivered fresh vegetables to one accommodation, which were later served alongside regionally grown lettuce and locally caught fish.

In addition, I discovered that accommodations organise events and retreats in collaboration with nearby or partner establishments, enabling them to share and recommend guests to one another. For example, yoga retreats, kayak tours, and tasting menus are offered by various accommodations, fostering connections between local SMEs.

My journey along the Waterway provided valuable insight into the concept of slow travel. The multi-day hike and stays at various accommodations offered an immersive experience, characterised by meaningful conversations with locals and a deeper understanding of the region. This experience highlighted both the challenges and difficulties faced by the region and its significant potential for development into a resilient, cohesive and year-round tourist destination. Additionally, it became evident that the Finnish archipelago attracts a diverse range of visitors, including outdoor enthusiasts, nature lovers and creative individuals such as artists.

The perception of the Waterway's potential was further confirmed during the “Waterway Meet & Greet” event held four months later, on October 2, 2024. Key findings from the stakeholder discussions included (1) A strong interest in expanding the season through active promotion of the Waterway for both locals and tourists as well as (2) the recognition of hikers, pilgrims, and outdoor enthusiasts as a particularly valuable target group due to their tendency to spend more time in the region and their dependence on local food and accommodation services.

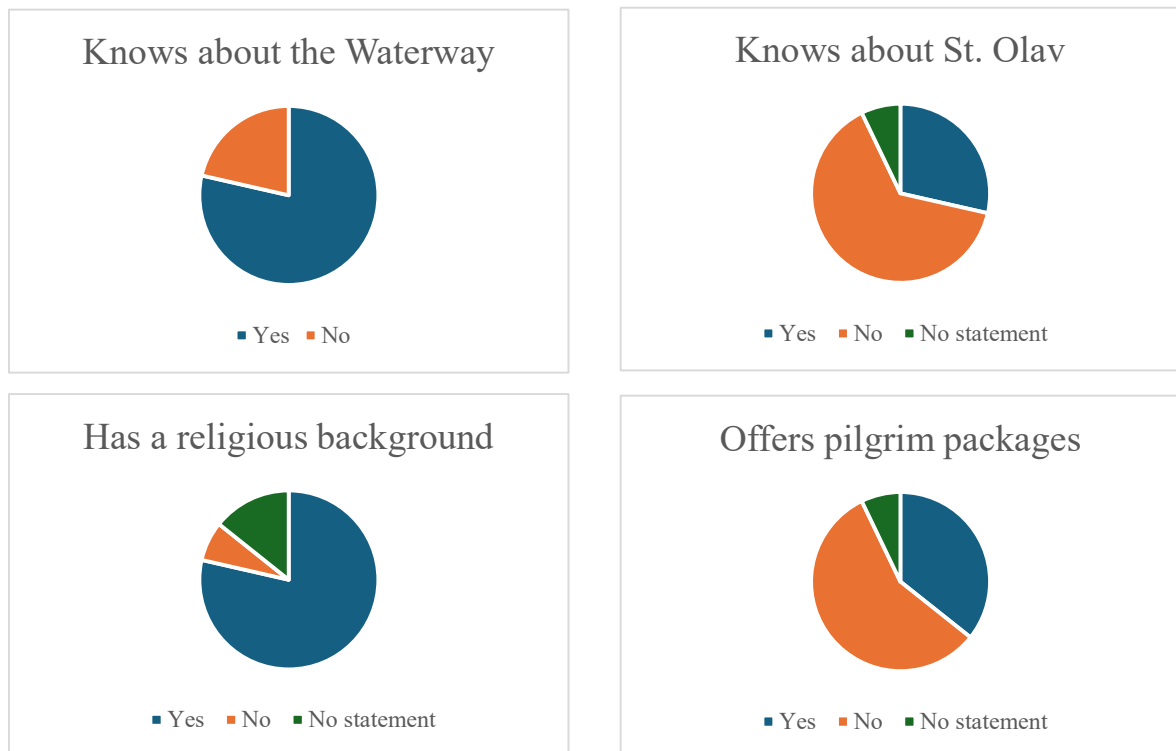
## 5.2 Key Findings of the Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and centered around overarching key themes, allowing for a more open conversation. The focus of the interviews has been primarily on stakeholder networks and collaborations, the level of connectivity within the Finnish archipelago and the professionalism and development stage of the accommodation.

The framing questions explored the interviewees' connection to pilgrimage in general and the Waterway in particular, their perceptions of the geographical and cultural border between Finland and Sweden and their views and aspirations for the development of the outdoor trail. This provided a deeper understanding of the border region of the Finnish archipelago and brought the themes of regional networking and community into sharper focus. An analysis of the interviews will be conducted based on these key themes, examined under the critical view of the metaphor approach by Alvesson (2011).

At the beginning of the interviews, the interviewees were asked about their connection to the Waterway, the figure of St. Olav, and pilgrimage in general, establishing the foundation for the interview. The following charts present the distribution of the collected responses in a quantified form.

*Figure 3: Interviewee's perception regarding the St. Olav Waterway*



*Own illustrations based on conducted interviews during field trip (May 2024)*

From a localist perspective (see “Methodology”), the first part of the interviews reflects the use of metaphors such as “identity work” and “cultural script application”. These were often employed by the interviewees to frame their business as non-religious and more tourism oriented. For instance, pilgrims were described as an “invisible group of people” (Interview 1) who had not been a primary target group but were seen as potentially profitable (Interview 11). However, once the academic purpose of the interview became clear, participants expressed greater openness towards pilgrims, emphasising that “tourism doesn’t exclude churches and religion but includes them as part of the history of a region and its culture” (Interview 4) and that “pilgrimage is not only about pilgrims but also about local people and their culture” (Interview 5). Interviewees frequently highlighted the values of those engaging in long-distance hikes or outdoor trails, such as pilgrims, describing them as “great guests with great stories and usually have time” (Interview 11) and appreciating common character traits (Interviews 5, 7, 9).

While the Finnish archipelago has traditionally targeted domestic tourists traveling the *Archipelago Trail* (a 250 kilometers long ring road from Turku to Naantali), “Thanks to the Waterway, there have been more international guests during the last years” (Interview 10). Pilgrim numbers have increased after the Covid-19 pandemic, partly due to partnerships like the one with the travel agency *Nordic Pilgrim*, which facilitates accommodations and logistics for hikers (Interviews 4, 7, 11, 13).

A common theme was the lack of local awareness of the Waterway or the St. Olav Ways, with many interviewees reporting no connection to pilgrimage (Interviews 1, 3, 8, 9, 12). One participant described pilgrims as “a bunch of old and religious people” (Interview 12), potentially as part of “moral storytelling” to emphasise their own identity (e.g., young and non-religious). In contrast, another participant noted that pilgrims were among the first tourists and that the concept of passports originated from pilgrimage passports (Interview 1). Across interviews, pilgrims were consistently seen as a desirable target group and several businesses were considering adding signs to indicate “pilgrim accommodation” to show their inclusion in the network.

When it comes to the main part of the interviews and the question about existing cooperations or connections to other accommodations, most respondents stated that while there are no active collaborations, they know of each other and could recommend others to guests (Interview 1, 4, 9).

Many cited a lack of time and energy to establish a shared network but showed clear interest in forming collaborations and attending events like the “Waterway Meet & Greet” (organised and held after the field trip, on October 2, 2024 in Korpo, Finland). Cooperation among businesses was commonly seen as vital for the region functioning as a “driveway”, connecting islands and most likely attracting the same tourists (Interview 9).

Some expressed concerns about nearby accommodations as “potential threats” or competitors (Interview 7), although another pointed out a shortage of high-quality accommodations in the area (Interview 4). This reflects a need for sensemaking (Metaphor 2: Perpetuating a storyline) to make sense of perceptions of competition or scarcity. Despite such challenges, no interviewee opposed the value of networks, indicating a shared cultural narrative that frames networks as essential drivers of regional development (Metaphor 4: Cultural script application).

When discussing regional and supra-regional connections, many interviewees were unaware of their (possible) involvement in larger networks such as the *St. Olav Waterway* project (2016–2020), which was launched as a collaboration among eight Finnish stakeholders and is part of both the international *St. Olav Ways to Trondheim* and the *European Cultural Routes* network.

Responses often focused on food supply challenges in the archipelago. Some emphasised the importance of networking with local producers, describing existing collaborations like using public buses to transport goods (Interview 4). One interviewee highlighted that such integrative networks to other producers are only possible for small businesses with “long-term and value-based thinking” (Interview 4), presenting locality as a unique selling point. However, this may reflect “Impression Management” (metaphor 5), promoting their business without comprehensive knowledge of similar local efforts.

Others pointed out the lack of infrastructure for local food production, with limited quantity, quality and affordability of local products. “Local products are so expensive [and] guests don’t want to pay more” (Interview 8). As a result, most businesses source food from major suppliers in Turku, Finland and Mariehamn, Åland (Interviews 1, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12).

Interaction between the Finnish archipelago and Åland was minimal, with no existing cooperation identified. Regional tourism offices (e.g., *Visit Turku*, *Visit Pargas*, *Visit Åland*) were briefly mentioned, but one interviewee highlighted broader political and social differences, describing the Waterway as “a patchwork of different hiking paths” and “just one of many things the commune is taking care of” (Interview 11).

On a more positive note, accommodations appreciated the travel agency *Nordic Pilgrim* for bringing more international tourists to the region in recent years. The CEO of *Nordic Pilgrim* described their networking efforts as “non-monetary investments that are very valuable”, reflecting mutual trust and significant business potential.

Answering questions about the stage of development and professionalism of their businesses proved challenging for many interviewees, as “identity work” (metaphor 3) and “impression management” (metaphor 5) were evident throughout their responses. However, the romanticist interview approach fostered a sense of honesty and openness. Some stakeholders honestly acknowledged that the high season constitutes a substantial portion of their annual income - estimated at 65–75% by one participant. Others admitted that their accommodations, often Bed & Breakfast establishments, struggle to generate sufficient profit to sustain their livelihood. As one interviewee put it, their business alone does not “pay the bills” (Interview 7), necessitating supplementary income through secondary employment (Interview 7, 8, 12).

Despite these challenges, most interviewees expressed optimism about the future. Many were hoping that their business would eventually become profitable, transitioning into their primary source of income (Interview 7, 8, 12). Comments such as “becoming profitable in the long run” (Interview 7), “turning into the main business” (Interview 8), and “making up for [at least] one salary” (Interview 12) reflect their aspirations for growth and sustainability.

From the interviewer’s perspective, the professionalism and scale of the visited accommodations (8 in total) varied significantly. These ranged from small Bed & Breakfasts with just a handful of beds (2/8), to hostels featuring cafés or restaurants with over ten beds (4/8), and even larger hotels offering more than fifty beds (2/8). This variation underscores the diverse nature of businesses along the Waterway, spanning from modest, family-run ventures to more established enterprises.

At the end of the interviews, the interplay of external factors - local circumstances, personal backgrounds, culture and the perceived intention of the interview - emerged as a defining influence, reflected by the metaphor “local accomplishment” (metaphor 1).

The final two questions addressed perceptions of the Finland-Sweden border and aspirations for the Waterway, contributing significantly to understanding the interview dynamics.

Some interviewees described a culturally closer connection to Sweden than Finland (Interviews 4, 8, 9), while others viewed the islands as a "connection between historically and culturally close countries" (Interview 1) or the Waterway as a "natural route" and "border-crossing in a way [because] technically it is border crossing" (Interview 4). A few minimised the significance of borders altogether, suggesting that "in some kind, we [Nordic people] are all the same" (Interview 1).

However, participants acknowledged Åland's unique status as an autonomous and demilitarised Finnish region, culturally perceived as closer to Sweden (Interview 10). Although the border between Finland and Sweden is recognised as lying somewhere in the Baltic Sea, only one interviewee referenced Märket, the island marking the only direct land border between Åland and Sweden (Interview 10).

In conclusion, all interviewees recognised the potential of the Waterway, with most expressing strong support for tourism along the route, believing it would benefit both their businesses and the region. They shared hopes for continued growth in pilgrim tourism, seeing pilgrims as an ideal target group to extend the season. Many emphasised the desire to promote all-year-round tourism, making use of all four seasons. However, awareness and promotion were seen as key areas for improvement, along with a need for better organisation and more activities to make the region more accessible. A few interviewees also highlighted the slow travel concept, emphasising the importance of changing the pace of travel and describing networking and building connections as a "slow process" in which "pilgrims [are] connecting the accommodations" (Interview 13).

*"That would be my wish that people understand how important it is to slow down."*

*(Interview 5, conducted on 16.05.2024)*

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 Evaluation of Applied Methods**

Reflecting on the qualitative empirical research approach, the applied method of this study of collecting data through fieldwork and interviews proved as a valuable way to gain insights to the lived realities, existing networks as well as challenges and potential for development of the tourism destination along the St. Olav Waterway in the Finnish archipelago.

The research design cannot be classified as a traditional case study because the trip, including stakeholder interviews, was planned and conducted prior to finalising the research framework. This study, therefore, developed dynamically during an independent internship trip. As a result, the outdoor- and pilgrimage path Waterway emerged as a case example and practical foundation, providing valuable insights into a rural region with significant potential for socio-economic development as a tourism destination.

The literature review highlighted the complexity of the topic, which, despite its regional focus and emphasis on sustainable regional development through network activation, remains multidimensional with diverse explanatory and solution approaches. The dynamic nature of networks and the difficulty of measuring their impacts further complicate drawing specific conclusions about their role in regional development. To address these challenges, it is beneficial to examine established case studies from other tourism destinations with well-developed stakeholder networks, such as the Norwegian pilgrimage network or the Camino de Santiago.

### **6.2 Discussion of Results**

#### ***6.2.1 In what ways do networks act as catalysts for regional development***

Modern academic perspectives view regions as dynamic systems shaped by internal and external influences, rather than static administrative units (Guttermann, 2023; Ibert et al., 2015; Kovanen et al., 2023). Viewing a tourism destination as a complex system consisting of interconnected actors aligns with sustainable tourism development approaches that balance environmental, social, economic, and individual factors (Ernst, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

Achieving this balance requires a dynamic, bottom-up approach that empowers local stakeholders and encourages active participation, similar to firms or organisations which can be also seen as organic ecosystems that thrive on active stakeholder engagement and individual responsibility towards a common purpose (Baggio et al., 2010b; Guttermann, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

In this context, the *Networking Approach* by Żemła (2016), rooted in Freeman's (1984) *Stakeholder Theory*, addresses the need for interorganisational networks between administrative areas (as it is the case in the Finnish archipelago and Åland) to connect independent SMEs and integrate their offerings into a unified tourism product. By uniting stakeholders around a common vision, networks create a shared *Destination Brand Experience* (Brakus et al., 2009), which enhances both the local community's social capital and the region's appeal.

By creating a unified tourism product, networks strengthen the region's competitive edge through consistent branding and offerings (Gnoth, 2004; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012). This tailored approach also addresses regional challenges, such as extending the tourism season - a key goal for Waterway SMEs - by attracting diverse, year-round visitors.

The interviews with Waterway-related stakeholders highlighted the deep cultural and personal connection that locals have with the unique archipelago area. This connection was emphasised as a key factor in further developing the region's socio-economic network and promoting the diverse collection of islands as a unified tourism destination.

Here, the question regarding the organisational structure and management arose and has often been addressed in related academic literature. It became clear that there are various approaches to regional management, ranging from destination marketers (Gnoth, 2004) or project-based initiatives (St Olav Waterway, n.d.b) to focal organisations acting as destination development agencies (Kovanen et al., 2023). While all these variants have their justification, they also exhibit certain limitations.

In contrast, agile networks, exemplified by the formation of various business clusters into a collective *Virtual Service Firm* as suggested by Gnoth (2004), appear to be less constrained by factors such as project duration and funding availability, thus allowing for a more dynamic development approach.

Practical tools and strategies identified through an extensive literature review include the concept of *Community-Led Local Development* (ESPON, 2020) as a foundation for community engagement, as well as *social innovation*, a widely adopted strategy for generating competency-based innovative solutions (Neumeier, 2012; Vilela, 2019). Additionally, *Collaborative Governance* (Kovanen et al., 2023) emerges as a participatory organisational model that fosters and expands partnerships and network structures.

### ***6.2.2 How can slow tourism contribute to regional development***

In the context of a sustainable regional development, the concept of *slow tourism* has emerged as an effective tool to foster cohesive networks and holds the potential of a bridging effect between individual SMEs within a tourism destination. Based on the literature review, the concept of slow tourism is described as an alternative to mass tourism by promoting an interactive, sustainable and authentic travel experience in which tourists foster a sense of connection to the region and gain more in-depth knowledge.

With tourists travelling along outdoor- and pilgrimage paths, such as the St. Olav Waterway, they actively contribute to the connection of different accommodations, service providers and other SMEs, thus promoting connectivity and a shared destination experience, as it can be seen along pilgrim networks in Spain (Camino de Santiago) and Norway (St. Olav Ways to Trondheim) for instance.

By using local services and engaging in local activities, “slow” tourists are likely to spend more time and money in the destination which could have a positive effect on the local economy. Apart from the economic benefit, the interviewed stakeholders showed clear sympathy for pilgrims and other tourists travelling the Waterway, who were often described with positive attributes such as open-mindedness and mindfulness towards their surroundings. There seemed to be a shared desire to strengthen and develop pilgrimage and hiking tourism along the Waterway.

As a specific positive effect of walking tourism (as a form of slow tourism), the World Tourism Organization (2019) highlights its ability to reduce seasonal limitations, thereby making the local economy more resilient to seasonality through year-round tourism. To achieve this, the WTO proposes the establishment of an overarching network of individual walking routes (e.g., the Camino or St. Olav Ways), which, as a unified brand, creates a cohesive tourism experience.

### ***6.2.3 What are the broader implications of this research for the Waterway or similar regions***

Based on the stakeholder interviews and Butler's TALC model (1980), the St. Olav Waterway has established a solid foundation for developing its own destination brand by fostering stakeholder collaboration. Currently, tourists create their own "value chains" by exploring trails such as the *Archipelago Trail* or the *Waterway*. While this offers individualised experiences, it also underscores the need for a more structured approach to tourism development, supported by studies advocating for a shared destination brand (Gnoth, 2004; Norwegian Ministry of Culture, 2012; Żemła, 2016).

A long-term oriented strategy could involve shaping the Waterway into a "virtual firm", as suggested by (Gnoth, 2004), uniting stakeholders under common brand attributes, shared goals and consistent quality standards. Such an approach holds the potential to unify the efforts of stakeholders under a collective vision, enhancing the visitor experience while fostering stronger collaboration within the network, as the studies by Brakus et al. (2009), Gnoth (2004) and Żemła (2016) demonstrate.

The integration into international networks, such as *European Cultural Routes* and *St. Olav Ways*, alongside the engagement of diverse stakeholders - from local businesses to transnational travel agencies - further highlights the region's commitment to collaboration within a cohesive network. Based on the networking approach by Żemła (2016), a dynamic network of active stakeholders could not only attract more visitors but also enhance the region's capacity to respond to external challenges, such as seasonal fluctuations, thereby fostering economic resilience.

Stakeholder interviews, primarily with SMEs in the Finnish archipelago, revealed widespread enthusiasm for expanding the network, increasing trail visibility, offering tailored services for pilgrims and participating in collaborative events. According to Neumeier's (2012) social innovation process, the region is currently in the third phase (*Delineation and Coordination*) and requires sustained management to build a dynamic network and progress in the development phase.

Tourism destinations at a similar stage of development can benefit from the findings by adopting participatory and coordinated strategies. Key tools include fostering stakeholder networks, leveraging international collaborations and standardising services to enhance socio-economic development while addressing regional challenges.

## 7. Conclusion

In light of our fast-paced, multi-complex and globalised society, sustainability has become a central concept in both public and academic discourse. This work focused on the importance of connections and transformations within the regional context. Changes within microcosms can have significant impacts on larger systems, underscoring the systemic nature of sustainability. This systemic interplay integrates ecology, economy and society, all of which are shaped by the decisions and intentions of individuals.

While an increasing number of studies address topics such as sustainable regional development, social innovation and alternative travel trends, the question of networks as a long-term approach to organising and fostering the resilient development of regions and destinations remains underexplored. In the context of hiking and pilgrimage routes, recent years have seen studies examining pilgrimage paths as eco-sustainable routes, as pathways for the heritagization of religions and as a form of slow tourism and local development. These studies predominantly focus on the ecological and cultural aspects of such routes as connecting elements within and between regions. Nonetheless, the regional economic perspective, particularly the socio-economic impact of networks along outdoor and pilgrimage trails, has received limited attention and was therefore addressed in this work.

The geographical scope of this study, with a focus on the Nordic St. Olav Ways, shed light on a frequently overlooked or relatively unknown pilgrimage and hiking region. This network of individual pilgrimage routes extends across Northern Europe and beyond, connecting different countries under the cross-border framework of the *St. Olav Ways to Trondheim*.

In this context, the study explored the role of networks in activating and strengthening stakeholder engagement and regional connectivity, that hold the potential to foster efficient, long-term progress tailored to the specific conditions of a region. Furthermore, it was examined how slow tourism along outdoor and pilgrimage paths enhances the value of networks by promoting an immersive, integrative and holistic travel experience. The central research question guiding this work was therefore: How do networks along outdoor and pilgrimage trails, such as the St. Olav Waterway, act as catalysts for sustainable regional development and what role does slow tourism play in this process?

The foundation for the qualitative empirical research was established during a research trip to the Finnish archipelago in May 2024, prior to the actual work on this thesis. During this trip, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders and community members on the Finnish islands (including Åland) near Turku, which ultimately led to the formulation of the research question. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the local dynamics within the Finnish archipelago and their implications for regional development in similar tourism destinations.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable tourism and regional development by utilising qualitative methods to capture the nuanced perspectives of local stakeholders, which are often overlooked in broader quantitative studies. As an analytical method for the interviews conducted during the field trip, Alvesson's (2003) metaphor approach was employed to gain a reflective insight into the region and its community. This was particularly important given the personal and location-based nature of the interviews.

The findings highlight that regional development, often initiated by a focal firm or organisation, is a gradual process shaped by diverse stakeholders. Destinations that embrace collective branding and foster collaboration among SMEs are better equipped to meet customer expectations. By building a unified value chain with a shared purpose, destinations can deliver unique tourist experiences while promoting sustainable growth, reinforcing regional identity and enhancing their brand.

Local communities and stakeholders are central to shaping and aligning with the destination brand. Their interdependence strengthens regional networks through co-opetition (cooperation and competition) and effective communication, contributing to a distinctive brand identity.

This study demonstrated how interdependence among regional and external stakeholders supports knowledge sharing and information exchange along the value chain. Such networks are crucial for adapting to challenges like seasonality and other location-based issues. As travellers move through a destination, particularly while following outdoor trails, they naturally link accommodations, service providers and SMEs, enriching the region's value chain and fostering interactive, sustainable development.

In this context, slow tourism complements rather than contradicts a dynamic networking approach. It can enhance effective collaboration within the network of a shared destination brand, as seen along pilgrimage paths in Norway, where the national tourism strategy integrates the *St. Olav Ways to Trondheim* as a unified network of independent hiking trails.

As an alternative form of travelling, slow tourism can therefore serve as a tool for fostering rural development through local engagement, in-depth travel experiences and knowledge creation in and between networks.

The interviews revealed that regional stakeholders must first recognise the potential or existence of a connecting pilgrimage or outdoor trail to create interactive value chains within a shared network. This awareness is essential for aligning their brands with the destination or integrating the destination brand into their marketing strategies.

Despite challenges like geographical isolation, seasonal dependence and limited international visibility, the Finnish archipelago has significant potential for long-term development. Leveraging the Waterway's role as a unifying link, the region can enhance its tourism appeal, foster economic resilience and strengthen sociocultural sustainability.

This study underscores the value of networks as catalysts for sustainable regional development, particularly through knowledge sharing along the value chain within a shared destination brand. Networks facilitate adaptation to external and internal factors, promoting resilience and social cohesion. Slow tourism along pilgrimage and outdoor trails can further support network growth by fostering stronger connections between tourists, local communities and the region.

As the researcher, my background in sustainable economy and regional development shaped my approach to the interviews and analysis, ensuring that the focus remained on both the economic and social aspects of the St. Olav Waterway. Nevertheless, the ecological aspect of sustainable development was not given focus from the outset of this study, as I was particularly interested in the socio-economic aspect created by networks along such trails. The study was inspired by my experiences in the Finnish archipelago, where the Waterway's potential as a driving force for development was evident.

While the qualitative approach offered valuable insights, the small sample size and geographic focus on the Finnish archipelago may limit the generalisability of findings. Future studies could explore broader Nordic regions or use mixed methods to combine qualitative insights with quantitative data.

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## **Appendix**

### **Intention and structure of the interviews**

**Overall topic:** Outdoor and pilgrimage trails as connecting and bridging elements in a regional context - Regional networking and connectivity between accommodations, local producers and other stakeholders as a result of slow tourism along the pilgrimage path St. Olav Waterway

**Intention:** open, semi-structured interview to engage people to talk freely

Assessment of whether and to what extent there is a network connecting the various stakeholders involved around the St. Olav Waterway (e.g., accommodations, suppliers, travel agencies, universities, cultural sites etc.) to evaluate the socio-economic impact of pilgrims and other 'slow' tourists on the region's connectivity and long-term development

### **Opening questions:**

- What is your relation to the St. Olav Waterway and to pilgrimage in general?
- How would you estimate the relevance of pilgrims / people travelling the Waterway for your business?

### **Three key aspects / focus themes:**

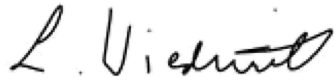
- cooperation between accommodations
- connectivity / level of networking in the region (macro perspective)
- level of professionalisation / development of the accommodation or business

### **Final questions:**

- How and where do you perceive the border between Finland and Sweden (geographically, culturally, linguistically)?
- How do you perceive the potential of the Waterway as both an outdoor and pilgrimage trail in contributing to the region's development? What are your wishes?

## **Declaration of Authorship**

Hereby, I, Leonie Wieduwilt, declare that I have independently completed this thesis and have not used any sources or aids other than those explicitly indicated. All third-party contributions (quoted or paraphrased) have been properly referenced. This thesis has not been submitted to any other examination authority in the same or similar form.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Wieduwilt', written in a cursive style.

Berlin, 08.01.2025