GASTRONOMY AS A REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOL

A study on the effects of the project "European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio Region 2020-21" on its cooperation partners

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to conduct a study on the effects of the project "European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio Region 2020-21" on its cooperation partners. The project is based on the European Region of Gastronomy status awarded annually by the IGCAT organization. The project involves companies and actors from several industries, to which the ERG project offers extensive support for their business development. The thesis examined the partners experiences of the project, on the basis of which an assessment of the project's functionality was formed. The commissioner of this thesis was Savonia University of Applied Sciences, which manages several ERG sub-projects. The findings of the study will be utilized in the further development work of the ERG project.

The theoretical framework of this thesis consists of three different components, which are the European Region of Gastronomy status, food tourism and research-based development work. This is a research-based development assignment that has features of both quantitative and qualitative research. The empirical part of the thesis consists of a survey, research results, conclusions and functionality assessment. The survey was conducted in March 2021.

The main results of this thesis are the answers to the research question and the conclusions drawn from the conducted survey. The most significant research results were highlighted with the help of a SWOT analysis, on the basis of which development proposals were formed. The results showed that the respondents had so far benefited from the visibility, contents and the extensive network brought by the project. However, the functioning of the project was severely hampered by the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic, which was reflected in the results on several occasions.

Keywords
European Region of Gastronomy, food tourism, networking, research-based development work

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct a study on the effects of the project "European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio region 2020-21" on its cooperation partners. The project involves a corporate financing share of approximately 72 companies and actors from several industries, to which the ERG project offers extensive support for their business development. With this thesis, I aim to discover the partners experiences of the project. Based on the findings, an assessment of the project's current functionality is formed. The commissioner of this thesis is Savonia University of Applied Sciences, which acts as a manager to several ERG sub-projects. The conclusions of this study will be utilized in the further development work of the ERG project.

The project is based on the European Region of Gastronomy status awarded annually by IGCAT (International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism). For the year 2020, Savonia UAS, in cooperation with ProAgria and the City of Kuopio, applied for the status for the Kuopio region. Based on the status, in 2020-21, a comprehensive project will take place in the Northern Savonia region. The project aims to produce new food tourism products suitable for international tourism, as well as make Northern Savonia an internationally known food tourism region.

The topic for the thesis was received from Hannaleena Uhlbäck-Ropponen and Henna Lehikoinen, who both act as project managers in the ERG sub-projects managed by Savonia UAS. The topic of the thesis was thus clearly delimited by the commissioner. I took this topic with great interest, as I found it extremely topical and unique, Northern Savonia being the first region in Finland to be awarded with the ERG recognition. I was also pleased with the clearly innovative and work-oriented approach of the topic and was keen on exploring food tourism as a rapidly growing tourism megatrend.

The thesis consists of eight chapters. The first chapter begins with an introduction, a brief overview of the thesis process and the key concepts. Chapters two, three and four form the theoretical framework of the thesis. Chapter two focuses on presenting the ERG project and its background, the third on food tourism and the fourth on research-based development work.

The fifth chapter goes through the different stages of the research and the sixth presents the research results obtained. Finally, in the seventh and eighth chapters I share the most significant conclusions formed on the study, give development proposals for the continuation of the project and share my final thoughts on the thesis. The figure below illustrates the structure of the thesis.

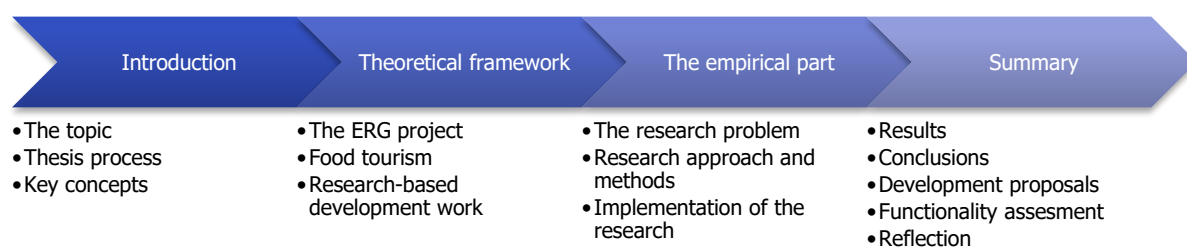| Introduction	Theoretical framework	The empirical part	Summary
• The topic • Thesis process • Key concepts	• The ERG project • Food tourism • Research-based development work	• The research problem • Research approach and methods • Implementation of the research	• Results • Conclusions • Development proposals • Functionality assesment • Reflection

FIGURE 1. The structure of the thesis

1.1 Thesis process

The figure below shows the stages of this thesis. After the topic was received from the commissioner, the next step was to create the topic and work plan, which were later presented to the thesis supervisor. Familiarization with the theory began well in advance and most of the theory had been written, before moving on to designing and publishing the survey. Once the survey was concluded, the responses received were analysed and conclusions were drawn. As soon as the thesis was completed, it was presented in an online thesis seminar, followed by a maturity test.
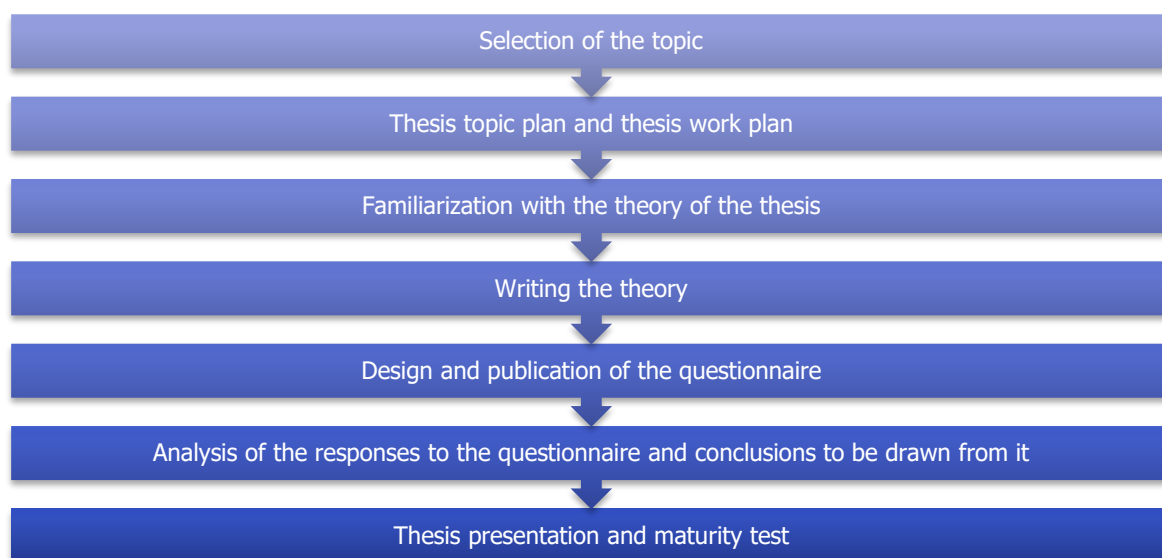
Selection of the topic

Thesis topic plan and thesis work plan

Familiarization with the theory of the thesis

Writing the theory

Design and publication of the questionnaire

Analysis of the responses to the questionnaire and conclusions to be drawn from it

Thesis presentation and maturity test

FIGURE 2. The stages of the thesis process

1.2 Key concepts

Development work = Systematic action to use the knowledge gained from research and / or practical experience to create new substances, products, production processes, methods and systems or to substantially improve existing ones. (Tilastokeskus s.a.)

Food tourism = Tourism, where the traveller travels to discover the local flavours and through them gets the spirit of the location. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 6.)

Food tourism product = Food-related tourism products, such as events, activities, organizations and facilities.

Food tourist = A traveler who travels primarily for food and food-related activities. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 6.)

Networking = Multilateral collaboration between a business network. By networking, companies seek solutions to challenges and problems for which they do not have sufficient resources. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 97, 98.)

2 EUROPEAN REGION OF GASTRONOMY

2.1 IGCAT

IGCAT, or International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism, is a non-profit organization founded in 2012. Working with specialised intergovernmental organizations, as well as regional stakeholder consortiums in the fields of gastronomy, culture, arts and tourism, IGCAT seeks to highlight local food, cultures and natural resources in its discussions, giving visibility to local innovation and entrepreneurship. The organization represents the idea that supporting and promoting regional cultural and food diversity is the key to the future of local economies and will enable a more sustainable and better standard of living for all citizens. (IGCAT 2019.)

Projects maintained by IGCAT (IGCAT 2019):

- **Region of Gastronomy Award**
- **Young Chef Award** → The goal of the project is to support and maintain local food cultures, recipes and traditions with the help of young chefs, who may later act as ambassadors for the local food products.
- **Local Food Gift Challenge** → The project simply aims to reward and give visibility to food products that are innovative and produced locally, which protect cultural and food diversity.
- **Food Film Menu** → The idea is to enhance the marketing of sustainable practices, local products and local recipes with the help of audio-visuals. IGCAT, along with the European Region of Gastronomy platform, want to encourage filmmakers to bring insight to the gastronomic areas and present the local food culture and products internationally. Finding new regional ambassadors, as well as increasing public interest in the project, are also part of the project's goals.
- **Top Visitor Experience** → Top Visitor Experience is an annual list published from the European Region of Gastronomy platform, that hopes to bring international visibility to niche food tourism experiences, enhance visitor's food experiences and reward sustainable initiatives.

2.2 European Region of Gastronomy status and its operational principles

The European Region of Gastronomy is an internationally acclaimed recognition awarded annually by the European IGCAT network to one or more regions at a time. With the recognition, IGCAT experts want to strengthen the position of local areas by drawing attention to their cultural richness and unique food experiences. (IGCAT 2021, 5, 4.) The European Region of Gastronomy recognition can also be compared to the title of European Capitals of Culture.

The European Region of Gastronomy status can be applied by any province or country. The region applying for the title must commit itself to the World Region of Gastronomy Platform for at least five years. (IGCAT 2021, 12.) Following requirements must be met to be considered for the award (Uhlbäck-Ropponen 2020):

- Responsibility for products or services that emphasize quality, reliability and the use of local raw materials.
- Cherishment of the local culture & local raw materials and commitment in the development of responsible operations.
- Companies and other parties involved in the project are committed to developing the environmental, economic and social responsibility of their operations.

The award was given for the first time in the year 2016, to the Portuguese province of Minho. Afterwards, the award has been received by 13 different regions across Europe, including the region of Kuopio. Recognition has so far been granted for the following regions and the year following the name indicates the anniversary year of that region (IGCAT 2019.):

- Minho, 2016
- Catalonia, 2016
- Riga - Gauja, 2017
- East Lombardy, 2017
- Aarhus, 2017
- North Brabant, 2018
- Galway, 2018
- South Aegean, 2019
- Sibiu, 2019
- Kuopio, 2020-2021
- Coimbra, 2021
- Slovenia, 2021
- Trodheim – Trøndelag, 2022
- Menorca, 2022

IGCAT (IGCAT 2021, 5-11) has defined six different focus areas for the European Region of Gastronomy award:

- **Feeding the planet** → The goal is to bring discussion and awareness to the solutions on producing enough food for everyone.
- **Innovation, creativity and job opportunities** → By promoting local uniqueness in an innovative and creative way, it sets a distinctive selling point for a variety of new services and experiences.
- **Educating for our future** → By making sure that everyone has accesses to good nourishing food, it can have a major impact on the future health and well-being of the citizens. Therefore, it is vital to nourish the children and adults through culinary and cultural education that creates understanding for the importance of local food and healthy food options.
- **Balanced and sustainable tourism** → The aim is to bring awareness about the advantages of integrating local food, recipes and traditions into tourism offerings for the

benefit of the region's visibility and its greater environmental, economic and cultural sustainability.

- **Linking urban and rural** → Nowadays, people hardly know about the origin of the food. The gastronomic province offers the opportunity to combine urban with rural and bring food closer to the people.
- **Well-being and healthier living** → By showcasing wholesome and healthy regional and local food, it enables us to have more holistic take on well-being.

2.3 European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio 2020-21 project ensemble

Northern Savonia is the first region in Finland to be granted with the European Region of Gastronomy status. The status was applied in cooperation for 2020 by ProAgria Eastern Finland, Savonia UAS and the City of Kuopio. (Uhlbäck-Ropponen 2020.) Due to the global pandemic, IGCAT has awarded the title to Kuopio exceptionally for two years, until the end of 2021.

The central theme of the European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio 2020-21 program is foraging – living according to nature's rhythm. The concept is to share with visitors the natural elements that are commonplace for Finnish people, such as Finland's pure nature, midnight sun, high-quality natural ingredients and the freedom for everyone to enjoy Finnish nature and its offerings. The ERG-project in collaboration with partner companies, has created an extensive outreach program that combines nature, activities, good food and accommodation. During the celebratory years, Northern Savonia hosts a comprehensive package of tasty, innovative and experiential events. A new kind of collaboration between business networks, creates unprecedented food-related services, events, training and entrepreneurship which at its best continues beyond the project. (TasteSavo s.a.)

The ERG project's core objectives are to create new food tourism products suitable for international tourism as well as make Northern Savonia an internationally known food tourism destination. To achieve these objectives, the project is built around a total of seven component projects (Figure 3), each of which have different focus points but share a mutual goal – increasing the region's vitality. The components are managed by ProAgria Eastern Finland and the Rural Women's Advisory Organization together with Savonia UAS. (Uhlbäck-Ropponen 2020.)

FIGURE 3. European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio 2020-21 projects (TasteSavo s.a.)

In order to monitor the achievement of the project' objectives, the ERG project ensemble has identified three indicators (Figure 4) focusing on different perspectives, which are: economic, social and environmental responsibility. (TasteSavo s.a.)

Economic responsibility	Overnight stays
	Overnight stays of foreign tourists
	Number of culinary tourism products
	Culinary tourism product sales (€)
Enviromental responsibility	Proportion of locally sourced food in company procurements (%)
	Number of restaurants monitoring food waste
	Number of environment- or responsibility-certified companies
Social responsibility	Number of partnerships in networks
	Number of products and services that highlight local culture
	Number of participants in food events and users of food services
	Satisfaction of participants in events and users of services

FIGURE 4. The indicators of the ERG project ensemble (TasteSavo s.a.)

The ERG project's cooperating partners include several companies and actors operating in the Northern Savonia region, to whom the project offers a wide range of support for their business development. The ERG project guarantees companies its support in their pursuit of new business, new products and services and a new customer base. In addition, the companies have the opportunity to benefit from the European Region of Gastronomy recognition, an international network and network-like cooperation with other actors. Participation in the project entitles the company to receive concrete support in product branding and development, marketing, sales and exports as part of the responsible gastronomic tourism brand in Northern Savonia. (TasteSavo s.a.)

3   FOOD TOURISM

Food tourism can be traced back to the early days of mankind, when hunting and gathering from nearby areas was common. At that time, however, "food tourism" was about satisfying the need for nutrition, rather than traveling for taste. Studies show that there is evidence of cultivation in some areas as far back as twenty-thousand years ago. Since then, over time, the world of flavours evolved and expanded across the globe by intellectuals, writers, poets, and chefs. By the 18th century, food awakened interest in a new way and people began to wander and search for different flavours. By this time, different areas began to provide food that was part of the national identity of the regions. The food experiences gradually began to be shared through writings, as middle-class Grand Tour tourists began to enjoy food on their travels solely from the perspective of pleasure and leisure. The modern travel (food) writings not only brought new destinations and flavours to everyone's attention, but also left a legacy that has carried on to this day. (Everett 2016, chapter 2.)

A food tourist can be defined in many ways but, essentially, they are tourists who take part in new trends of cultural consumption. They want to experience the destination authentically through food experiences and they care and share an interest in the origin of the food. They also understand the value of food in social interactions, in sharing experiences with others. Such food travellers have, on average, higher than normal consumption habits, which is why they typically expect more and try to avoid uniformity. According to the food traveller, gastronomy should be authentic, surprising and convey personality. Otherwise, it will become vulnerable, de-localized and subject to adulteration. (UNWTO s.a., 7.)

The World Food Travel Association (2021) has defined food tourism as "the act of traveling for a taste of place in order to get sense of place." The motives for the trip are the taste experiences through which the tourist gets sense of the local culture. According to the World Food Travel Association (2021) the definition includes everyone from beverage- and food-loving travellers to gourmet enthusiast and even travellers who like to experience foods based on farms. It covers 20 different industries and nearly two dozen different types of activities. (World Food Travel Association 2021, 7.)

The figure 5 indicates how food can act as a primary or secondary motivation for travelling. The figure also shows how different food activities can be the main reason when choosing a travel destination. However, to be classified as food tourism the desire to experience different types of cuisines or local produce must act as significant source of motivation. Thus, not every trip to a restaurant is considered food tourism. (Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, Cambourne 2003, 10.)

FOOD TOURISM

RURAL/URBAN
TOURISM

LOW INTEREST/NO
INTEREST e.g. visiting a
familiar restaurant while
you are travelling because
you have to eat

CULINARY
TOURISM

GASTRONOMIC
TOURISM

CUISINE
TOURISM

LOW INTEREST
e.g. visiting a local market,
food festival, winery, or
restaurant because it is
'something different'

No of
tourists

MODERATE INTEREST
e.g. visiting a local market,
festival, restaurant or winery
once you have arrived at a
destination as part of a wider
range of lifestyle activities

GOURMET
TOURISM

HIGH INTEREST e.g. travelling to a
destination with the primary motive
being to visit a specific restaurant,
market or winery. All, or nearly all,
tourist activities are food related

PRIMARY   SECONDARY   SUBSIDIARY TO OTHER INTERESTS

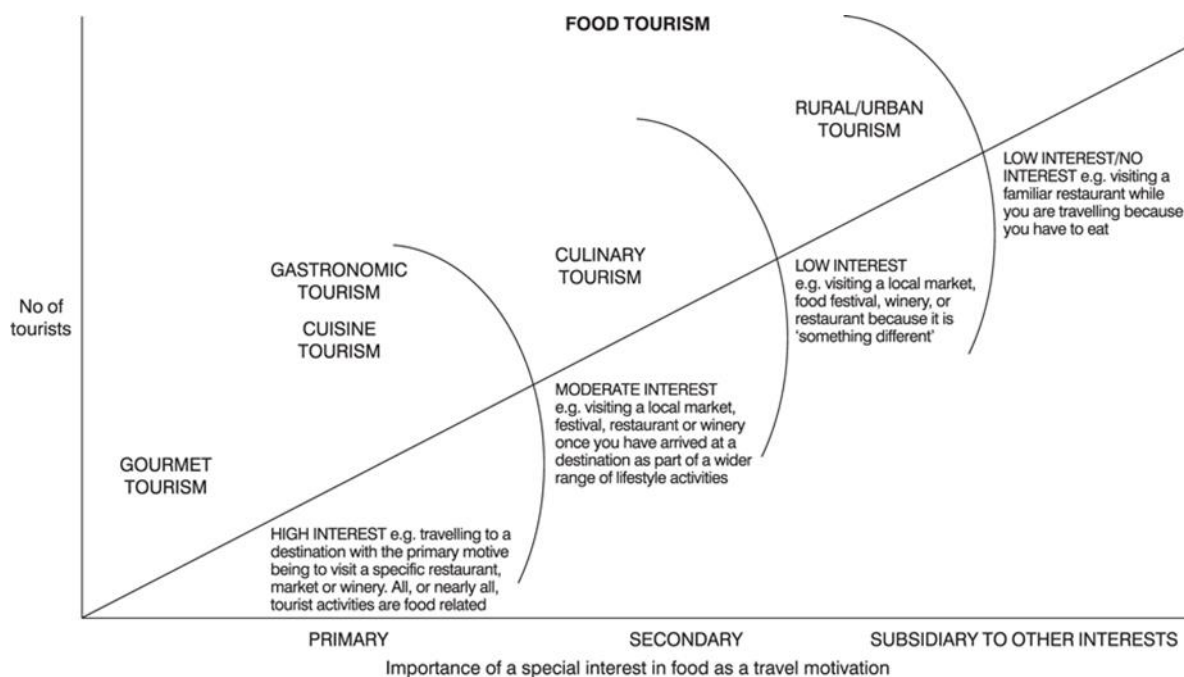Importance of a special interest in food as a travel motivation

FIGURE 5. Levels of interest in food tourism (Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, Cambourne 2003, 11)

Over the last decade, food tourism has increased worldwide due to two main reasons. Firstly, people's interest in knowing where the food comes from and secondly, to discover new foods and food preparations. The challenge is to determine where food tourism begins and where it ends. For example, which of the available activities carried out on a farm are seen as tourist activities from a tourist perspective. A visit to the farmers market is often counted as a tourism activity, while a visit to a grocery store where you can buy the same product is not counted for it. (Stanley 2015, 3.)

The growing interest in food tourism is also confirmed by a report recently published by the World Food Travel Association (2020), which examines the growth of food popularity and the factors influencing it. According to the study, 86% of tourists have been motivated to travel or choose a destination based on food and beverage activities such as attending a festival, visiting a landmark restaurant, or eating local food. The same study also revealed that in the past two years, 95% of leisure travellers had participated in a food tourism experience. (World Food Travel Association 2020, 23, 48.)

When examining the factors that positively contribute to the growth of food tourism, the researchers found that its attractiveness was due i.a. to its effect on more senses than other travel activities. In addition, the travellers have the chance to explore multiple food activities in a single day and the ones who decide to re-visit the destination, have the possibility to experience new food and beverage products instead of perhaps previously seen attractions. Studies show that millennials are particularly interested in food tourism and their interest in it does not decrease with age. In addition, they inspire their friends and relatives to food travel and pass this enthusiasm on to future generations through their children. A positive effect on the increase in food tourism is also seen in the fact that, nowadays, the traveller may find a lot of information in advance through social media, such as watching videos on YouTube. (World Food Travel Association 2020, 23.)

As food tourism continues to grow into one of the most dynamic segments of tourism, the importance of gastronomy for the diversification of tourism and the development of local, regional and national economies is increasingly valued. Food tourism not only has a positive effect on the economy and employment, but also on the preservation of local heritage; In addition to local food, tourists experience an interest in its origin and manufacturing processes, making it an expression of cultural tourism. The development of food tourism is worthwhile as it contributes to the general perception of the destination. (UNWTO s.a, 5, 9.)

3.1 Food tourism in Finland

Food is an integral part of an experiential tourism product. In Finland, efforts have been made to officially develop these products since 2015, when the country's first Food Tourism Strategy was implemented. The strategy was later extended for the following years of 2020-2028. In these years, the aim is to develop Finnish food tourism with top products, encourage for creation of combination products and food tourism routes, promote competitiveness of tourism and food industries, support raising of quality standards, improve the image of Finnish food cultures and build an active food tourism network within the country. The broad vision of Finnish food tourism is to build food tourism products that utilize the strengths of Finnish nature, are accessible, domestically and internationally known, tasty, support holistic well-being, are local and part of experiential tourism both in pure nature and indoors. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 4.)

The competitive factors of Finnish food tourism are formed by locality, pure nature and creativity, which are the three driving themes of the official strategy. The first theme, Taste of Place, highlights the diverse, Finnish, regional and local food culture that prevails in the country. The mixture of east and west and different regional flavours forms a unique food culture unparalleled. The companies and operators are encouraged to use local and natural foods and to share the origin of food with the tourists. Finnishness and Finnish way of life can be shared with tourists through food. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 27.)

Pure Pleasure represents the health benefits of pure Finnish food for both, the mind and the body. Finland has the cleanest air and water in the world, which enables optimal conditions for the production of high-quality ingredients. Clean and natural food is also sustainable. It is responsible food production that minimizes the food waste at all stages of food chain, utilizes local ingredients and is more environmentally friendly overall. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 27.)

The final theme, Cool & Creative, encourages the unleashing of creativity in the development of new food tourism products. Pure Finnish food, unique food traditions, inventive food innovations and a unique restaurant culture offer a wide range of opportunities to diversify food tourism in Finland. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 27.)

3.2 Food tourists in Finland

The most significant measures of Finnish food tourism are directed at the markets of the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and China, which are currently the fastest growing tourist nations in Finland. The Food Tourism Strategy also directs its marketing to Italy, France and United States, not to

forget Sweden and Russia, which are significant countries in terms of tourist volumes for Finnish tourism. Naturally, also domestic tourists play an important role. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 19-20.)

According to the target group guide prepared by Visit Finland (Hietasaari s.a.), Finland has six different customer segments (Figure 6) among tourists from the above-mentioned countries. The first three segments all share a mutual interest in nature as a diverse source of health and well-being. However, their motivations for visiting the nature slightly differentiate from each other. Nature Explorers seek for nature to recharge their batteries and to enjoy the peacefulness, while Activity Enthusiasts wish to explore nature through different activities such as extreme sports, cross-country skiing and animal watching. Third so-called nature segment, Nature Wonder Hunters, travel to Finland to experience unique nature experiences such as forests, Nordic lights, the midnight sun and national parks. (Hietasaari s.a., 12-17.)

As for the rest of the customer segments, they are all united by an interest in Finnish culture and lifestyle. City Breakers motivation is driven by attractions and urban experience, consisting of e.g., urban culture & food culture, events, shopping possibilities and museums & design areas. The Authentic Lifestyle Seekers are attracted by authentic Finnish experiences through which they get the sense of the culture. Lastly, The Comfort Seekers, who are attracted to quality experiences and comfort. They want their holiday to consist of experiences that support holistic well-being such as spas, wellness services, unique accommodations, and reindeer & husky safaris. (Hietasaari s.a., 12-17.)

The Finnish Food Tourism Strategy has concluded that out of all the customer segments the City Breakers, Authentic Lifestyle Seekers and Nature Explorers are the ones that show the most interest in food tourism. They are experimental tourists with a genuine interest in local food, food-related activities and Finnish food culture as a whole. (Havas & Adamsson 2020, 19.)

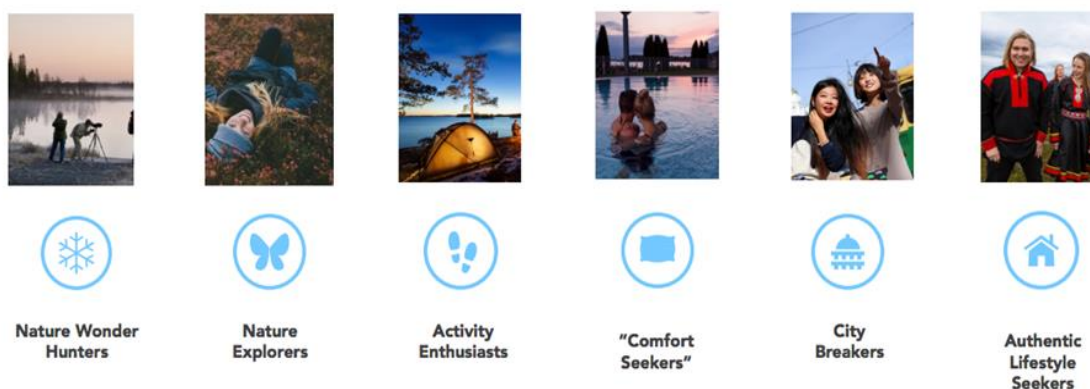FIGURE 6. Main traveller segments that have an interest in visiting Finland (Business Finland 2017)

3.3   Food tourism in Northern Savonia region

The potential of Northern Savonia as a dynamic food tourism region has been recognized for a while already. Efforts have been made to meet the potential of the area since 2014, when ELY (Center for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment) published a development plan for the

years 2014–2020 called "Northern Savonia Rural Vision 2020". The long-term vision of the development plan was to make Northern Savonia a nationally and internationally known food province through new networks and regional cooperation. (ELY 2014.) The vision was actively pursued, e.g., through the three-year coordination project "RuokaSavo" published in 2015. The project aimed to develop food tourism e.g., through various food events, perhaps the best known of them all; Satoa Kuopio Food Festival. (Maa- ja kotitalousnaiset 2015.) The Satoa event celebrates the local tastes of Northern Savonia and brings together local entrepreneurs and consumers who enjoy food (Satoa s.a). However, the Satoa Festival is by no means the only food tourism event organized in Northern Savonia. Another well-known one is the Kuopio Wine Festival, which takes place every summer in the port of Kuopio. As the name implies, the event offers an opportunity to enjoy a variety of wines, good food and live performances. (Kuopio Wine Festival s.a.) These two different events are a great example of the diversity of food tourism in Northern Savonia and people's continuous interest in the region's unique taste experiences. The ERG status granted to the region is an indication that Northern Savonia has clearly established itself as one of the most important food regions in Finland and that the region's potential is now also recognized on an international level.

3.4 Food tourism trends

Food tourism is more than just a meal: it can include food tourists' interest in mushroom or berry picking, fishing, indoor markets, restaurants, food strands, home visits, distillery visits or picknicks in the wild. At its best, food tourism engages and teaches the traveller something new. (Havas, Moilanen, Adamsson & Huff 2019.) According to comprehensive research conducted by Haaga-Helia UAS (LAB8 2019), there are eight trends that will emerge in the food tourism of the future.

Conscious food travel

The people who tend to practise sustainability at home, often want to follow the same lifestyle when traveling. Naturally, this also applies to food, which means that people are on the look for locally sourced and ethnically sustainable food. Thus, many countries, cities, towns and restaurants want to meet those customer expectations by offering them sustainable food. (LAB8 2019, 3-4; Havas et al. 2019.)

Authenticity and locality

More and more tourists are looking forward to eating the destination's authentic local food. Mass-produced and cheap food offerings are no longer of interest, but new flavours and local traditional food is appreciated. As a result, the food offerings in many destinations have also changed and suppliers are encouraged to offer perhaps less known local food instead of the familiar world cuisines. The local flavours become familiar to the tourist at the markets, food stalls and food tours organized by the natives. (LAB8 2019, 5-6; Havas et al. 2019.)

Food events and festivals

Nowadays, rarely anyone attending an event is satisfied with just general entertainment. The expectations are higher and people are on the look for an event that can offer a holistic experience. In recent years, food in particular has established itself at various events. A good example of this is the

annual Flow Festival in Helsinki, where in addition to music, various food experiences form a large part of the event. Festivals are perceived as a fascinating environment for experimenting with new food innovations and cuisines. (LAB8 2019, 7-8; Havas et al. 2019.)

Food stories and storytelling

Storytelling has steadily become one of the most effective means of communication efforts and it has particularly been used by the travel and tourism sectors. Destinations, that have implemented food tourism strategies, seek to create new culinary experiences that convey the stories of the region and strike emotions in travellers. The Nolla restaurant in Helsinki is a great example of detailed storytelling, as the name translates to "zero" and refers to the fact, that the restaurant uses zero emissions. (LAB8 2019, 9-10; Havas et al. 2019.)

Micro food trips

Nowadays, people are strongly tied to work time-space structure, which means that travellers must pinch their free time to travel in the evenings and mornings or on the weekends. Short food trips can consist of visits to food festivals at the hometown, day trips to a foreign city or even overnight trips. To attract micro food tourists, it is important to create ready-made food travel attractions, which minimize the time spent and maximize the content. (LAB8 2019, 11-12; Havas et al. 2019.)

Going it alone but eating together

Interest in traveling alone has grown steadily in recent years. The relationship status or the absence of a friend is not perceived as a limiting factor for traveling, instead one can go on the trip by oneself and still find company to dine with. Nowadays, there are plenty of options specifically for solo travellers to experience different food related events. A good example are various meal-sharing platforms where one can book a dinner at someone else's place. (LAB8 2019, 13-14; Havas et al. 2019.)

Multigenerational food travel

The multigenerational food tourism trend features travel, where many generations travel together. This way of traveling often poses challenges for the food providers when, in addition to individual preferences, differences between generations must be considered. It can be challenging to come up with food that pleases both older and younger generations, especially when food is to be seen as a unifying factor between the generations. (LAB8 2019, 15-16; Havas et al. 2019.)

Technology-fuelled food spaces

The growth of digitalisation is strongly reflected in food tourism, as companies use technology to create more experiential dining experiences for the customers. By utilizing mobile, wearables, AR/VR, loT, robotics, AI and so on, food experiences can be taken to unprecedented new levels and dimensions. The power of social media should not be forgotten either. Food tourism destinations should have an idea on how to increase its Instagram worthiness and provide that perfect picture for the customers. (LAB8 2019, 17-18; Havas et al. 2019.)

4 RESEARCH-BASED DEVELOPMENT WORK

4.1 Development work as a concept

Rapid changes in today's operating environment have created a wide range of new challenges and opportunities for companies and other organizations. Continuous development work has taken on a significant role and serves as a prerequisite for successful business. Often through development work, companies seek to create new ways to operate, methods, products or services based on the environment and the company's own needs. (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2020, 11-13.)

As a minimum assumption, companies must strive to keep up with developments, however the best performers are those that have succeeded in driving development themselves. True successes often arise from those who are able to assess the actual, but also the future development prospects, prepare for them and achieve their long-term goals in various future situations. The agility of an organization, the ability to absorb changes quickly and the speed of response are central to its success. Not to mention innovation, which importance is constantly on the rise. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 11-13.)

Companies need continuous development work for i.a. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 12):

- To improve their profitability or to achieve growth
- Developing, testing and commercializing new business models, goods and services
- Creating a functioning organizational structure and motivating staff
- Understanding changes in customer preferences
- Anticipating future demand and other factors affecting operations
- Streamlining its operations and developing its processes
- Expansion into new target markets and internationalization
- To solve problems that have arisen in the organization

4.2 Features of research-based development work

Research and development are often connected to each other, while research is also emphasized in development work. Figure 7 illustrates how research-based development work has features of both scientific research and development based on everyday thinking. Every day thinking refers to the developer's own unsubstantiated conclusions. According to Ojasalo et al. (2020), a comparison of these three forms of development helps, above all, to identify the most recognizable features of research-based development. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 17.)

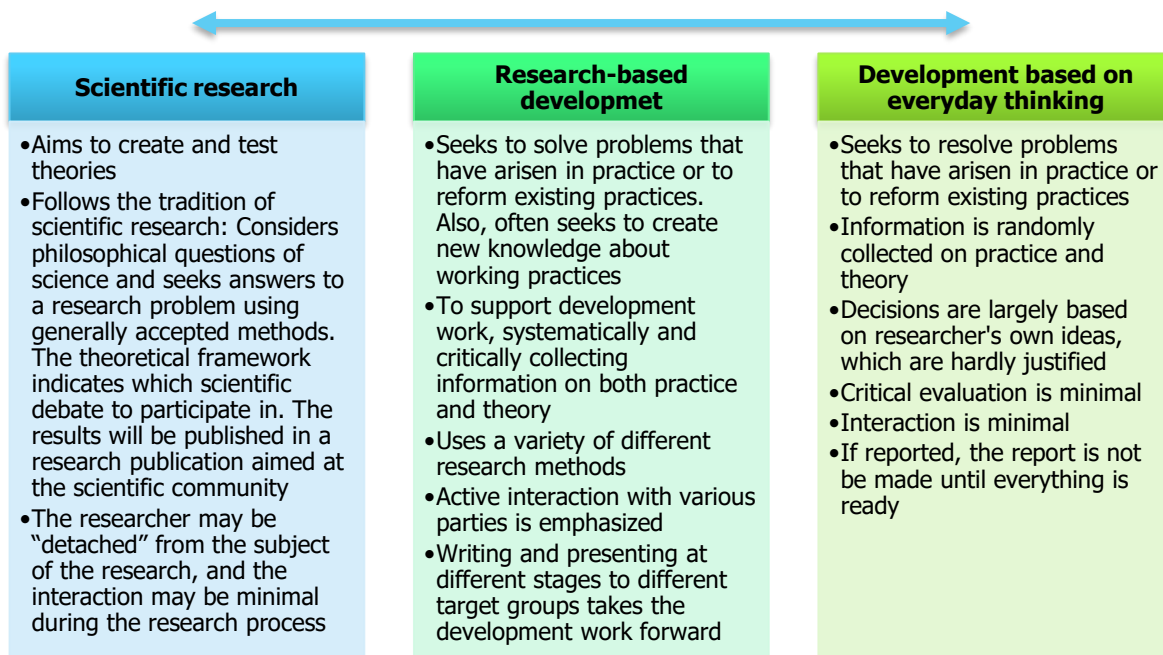| Scientific research	Research-based developmet	Development based on everyday thinking
•Aims to create and test theories •Follows the tradition of scientific research: Considers philosophical questions of science and seeks answers to a research problem using generally accepted methods. The theoretical framework indicates which scientific debate to participate in. The results will be published in a research publication aimed at the scientific community •The researcher may be "detached" from the subject of the research, and the interaction may be minimal during the research process	•Seeks to solve problems that have arisen in practice or to reform existing practices. Also, often seeks to create new knowledge about working practices •To support development work, systematically and critically collecting information on both practice and theory •Uses a variety of different research methods •Active interaction with various parties is emphasized •Writing and presenting at different stages to different target groups takes the development work forward	•Seeks to resolve problems that have arisen in practice or to reform existing practices •Information is randomly collected on practice and theory •Decisions are largely based on researcher's own ideas, which are hardly justified •Critical evaluation is minimal •Interaction is minimal •If reported, the report is not be made until everything is ready

FIGURE 7. The nature of research-based development work (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 18)

Research-based development can originate from a variety of perspectives, such as an organization's development needs or a desire to implement changes. Research-based development is typically very pragmatic; it not only describes or explains things but seeks better alternatives to them and takes things forward in practice. Research-based development calls the view into question, linked to the tradition of scientific research, that generally accepted methods guarantee the acceptability of results. Indeed, a significant difference between scientific research and research-based development is in terms of the purpose of the activity; Scientific research seeks to produce a new theory of a phenomenon, while research-based development seeks to bring about practical improvements or new solutions. However, according to Ojasalo et al. (2020), it should not be ruled out that research-based development work should also aim to produce new information about practice. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 19.)

Research appears in development work in such a way that development proceeds systematically, analytically and critically. The Solutions made during the development work and the information produced are built on existing information, rather than relying on unsubstantiated information. Research is important in development work i.a. because it allows the factors influencing it to be taken into account more comprehensively and systematically than usual, which makes the results better justified. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 21.)

According to Ojasalo et al. (2020), development work is often described as a process (Figure 8), in which the different stages clearly follow each other. Examining development work as a process helps to outline and distinguish the stages related to it. It also helps the author to form an idea over what the project is evolving into. The process work proceeds systematically and the aim is to review all the necessary factors before moving on. In practice, however, the process can be confusing and the steps and differences between the steps are not easily discernible. Ojasalo et al. (2020) remind that one should not worry, even if the work does not proceed according to the described process steps. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 22-23.)
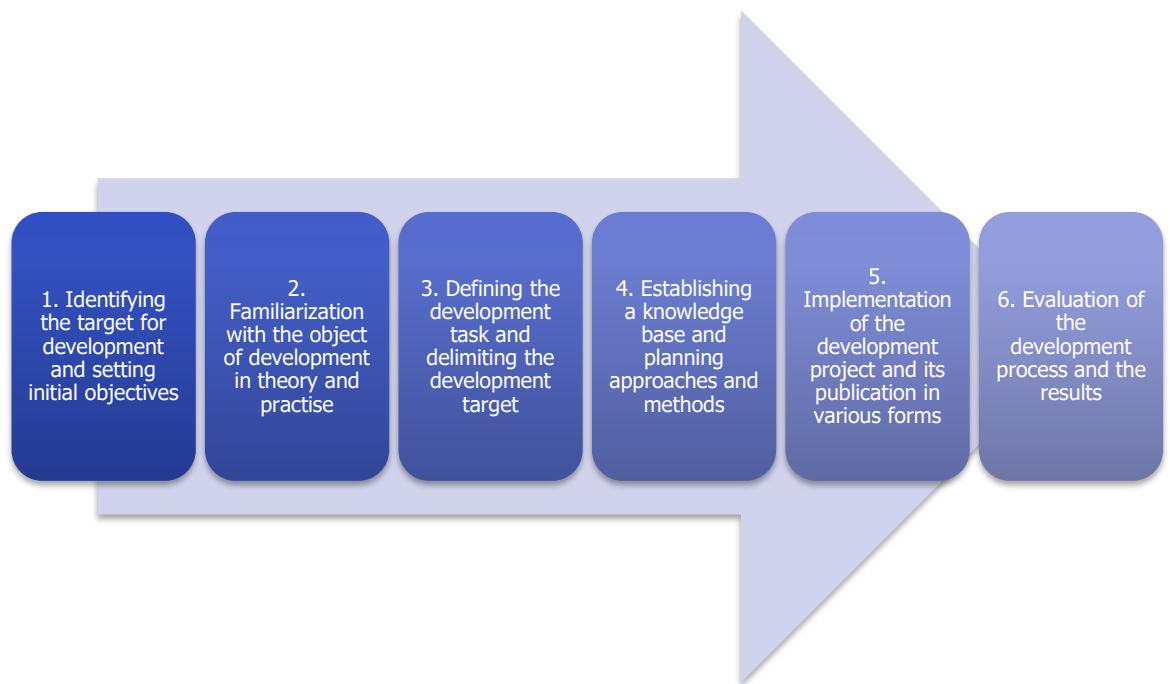
FIGURE 8. The process of research-based development work (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 24)

5   IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESEARCH

5.1   The Research problem

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of the project "European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio region 2020-21" on its cooperation partners. The project partners are companies and actors operating in various fields in Northern Savonia region. Through this research, the aim is to find out the partners' experiences of the project, on the basis of which an assessment of the project's current functionality is formed. The conclusions of this study will be utilized in the further development work of the ERG project.

The research problem of this study:

- What kind of effects has the project "European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio Region 2020-21" had on its cooperation partners?

5.2   Research approach

It is necessary to consider the approach the development work plan should follow (Figure 9), before choosing the methods to be used and planning them in more detail. The approach may guide the use of certain methods, but it should be remembered that almost all methods are suitable for any approach. It can often be seen that features from several different approaches have been used in the process. The best is to use creativity in choices and pick out the approach traits that suit the author's own work. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 51-52.)

FIGURE 9. Approaches to research-based development work (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 52-100)

In a globalizing world, the importance of networking continues to grow rapidly. It has led to an increasing interest in community development and the expansion of corporate networks in business life. The community development is well suited to increasing a company's competitiveness. By developing its community, a company can strive to improve its efficiency, develop an area of its operations by utilizing the special expertise of other companies or create completely new business to-

gether with partner companies. The community development does not have to follow a specific research method, but, for example, service design methods (e.g. stakeholder maps, design games) are well suited. (Ojasalo et al. 2020, 97-100.)

In this case, the approach was quite clearly community development. The ERG project involves an extensive and diverse network of companies and actors from variety of industries, ranging from the local level to the national level. The networks around the project naturally include IGCAT. The companies own network in the Northern Savonia region and the network operating on the Kuopio-Tahko axis operate locally, while Visit Finland operates at the national level. This community development study will provide insight into the effects the ERG network has had on the companies and actors so far and how it could be further developed.

5.3   Research method

Research methods are roughly divided into qualitative and quantitative methods, however according to the situation, combining these methods is also possible. The methods provide tools to obtain the desired information from the research. In order to collect the research data as reliably and comprehensively as possible, choosing a suitable research method is essential. (Vilkka 2015, chapter 3.) This study includes features of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the emphasis of which varies in terms of data collection and data analysis.

In quantitative research the intention is to gain numerical information, which can be used to describe something in general, to which something has changed or affected one another. This research method describes human activity numerically, causally and technically, on the basis of which it seeks to find legality that explains why things are as they are. This general legality is presented numerically, for example, as distributions, mean and standard deviation. (Vilkka 2021, chapter 3.)

Qualitative research seeks to understand the phenomenon under research from the perspective of the subject. Meaning, the research interest is in the subject's experiences, thoughts, feelings and the meanings that they give to the subject under research. (Puusa & Juuti 2020.) The idea of qualitative research bases on the belief that statistical dependencies alone do not explain an individual's actions. This research method finds interest in the anomalies, while the quantitative research seeks to prune them out. The challenges of qualitative research include its subjective nature, which means that the researcher's own interpretation, conclusions and other choices affect the results. This often leads to research problems in the study; thus, the goal of objectivity is not achieved with qualitative research. (Vilkka 2021, chapter 3.)

5.4   Data collection method

The research data was collected using a quantitative research method. Quantitative means of collecting research data are e.g., questionnaires, systematic observation or the use of ready-made registers and statistics. Regardless of the data collection method, people and cultural products, such as all human-made image and text material, are all suitable for quantitative research. (Vilkka 2015, chapter 4.)

A questionnaire is the most common method of data collection for quantitative research and may as well be referred to as a postal survey, an informed survey, or a mass survey, depending on how the survey is conducted. It may also be referred to as a survey study, suggesting that the questionnaire is standardized. Standardization implies that all the respondents are questioned in the same way. An informed survey, on the other hand, means that the researcher encounters the respondents in person, either when distributing the questionnaires or later when retrieving the responded forms. During the encounter, the researcher can tell in more detail about the survey and its purpose. An informed questionnaire can be considered as an intermediate form of a questionnaire and a personal interview, in which the researcher may also ask additional questions. (Vilkka 2015, chapter 4.)

The questionnaire can be forwarded to the subject by mail, email, internet, telephone or in person. In a questionnaire sent by mail, the respondent himself reads the written question and provides his response in writing. This type of data collection is suitable for a very large and scattered group of people and it has the advantage of always keeping the defendant anonymous. However, collecting the data this way, is generally quite laborious and the response rate is often low. (Vilkka 2015, chapter 4.)

Conducting the questionnaire electronically, by telephone or in person, generally guarantee a high response rate. A telephone interview is a very common way to gather data, as 90% of the citizens can be reached by phone. With the growing importance of digitalisation, it can be said that electronic surveys are generally quite accessible as well. Email and internet surveys work best when the population consists of actors from largely populated companies and organizations. It is also necessary to ensure that everyone has a technically equal opportunity to respond to the survey. However, the challenge of email and internet inquiries is to ensure anonymity, as often the email address can already reveal the respondent. (Vilkka 2015, chapter 4.)

In this research, the data was collected through a questionnaire that was sent to subjects via email. The population under the study consisted of companies and actors involved in the ERG project, which operate in several different industries in the Northern Savonia region. With the assistance of the survey, it was possible to quickly and easily reach a relatively large number of companies that were spread all over the region. Due to the scale of companies involved in the project, it would not have been possible to reach them all for a personal interview.

The construction of the survey began in early March 2021, with the help of an electronic survey system called Webropol. Together with the client, it was decided to conduct the survey in Finnish, so that any challenges posed by a foreign language would not affect the results. The question concerning the anonymity of the survey was also clear from early on. The survey was left completely anonymous to ensure that the companies were comfortable to share their genuine thoughts on the project. The background of the respondents was sought to be clarified with only a few specific questions concerning the company's main activity, location and size.

The survey questions were pre-defined by the client and changed a few times during the compilation process. In the end, a total of 19 questions were chosen, 3 of which were explanatory factors. The survey had both closed and open-ended questions, to provide more in-depth data for analysis.

The questions were divided according to eight different themes, which included background information, education, communication, food tourism products, local food use, ERG benefits, responsibility and feedback. The aim was to organise the questions as logically as possible to make the survey consistent and easy to respond to. To ensure that the survey was comprehensible for every respondent, the wording of the questions was individually considered. The visual side of the survey was implemented by adding the official ERG logo, which also increased the identifiability of the survey.

The survey was inspected several times together with the client, to ensure that it would examine exactly what was to be examined. When the survey was found to be working, it was sent with a cover letter to 72 companies involved in the project. In an agreement with the client, it was decided to not send the survey to companies who joined the project at the beginning of the year 2021. Due to the fact, that they had not experienced enough to provide reasonable input.

The survey was open for just under two weeks (24.3-5.4.2021), during which the companies were reminded of it on two separate occasions. Challenges to the research were brought by the fact that the research phase of the work, coincided with the re-acceleration phase of the Covid-19. The opening hours of the restaurants were restricted primarily from 8th of March for 3 weeks, which was later extend by another 3 weeks. As a result, some companies were barely able to operate, some were not at all. This made contacting them very difficult.

After receiving 19 survey responses, I tried to reach out to others by phone. Most of the companies I reached by phone wanted to give their respond through the previously emailed survey. However, the answers of the respondents questioned by phone were manually added to the survey. Despite the effort, several companies could not be reached, which could be due to previously mentioned restrictions on opening hours. Reaching out to businesses by phone, increased the response rate by 11, bringing the total number of respondents to 30.

5.5 Methods of data analysis

The research data of the thesis was decomposed by both quantitative and qualitative methods. The method of analysis was influenced by the structure of the question under discussion i.e., whether the question appeared as a closed or open question. The percentages of the quantitative data had automatically been calculated in the Webropol service, while the qualitative data was analysed manually using a thematic analysis method.

Thematic analysis as a method suggests that the analysis phase of the data focuses on looking at the features that are common to several interviewees. By combining the data, the aim is to find regularities or similarities between different categories. Coding or quantification can be used to aid in the formation of themes. (Puusa & Juuti 2020, chapter 9.)

The research data was collected anonymously with the help of a Webropol survey tool, where the answers were kept behind a password. The qualitative results of the survey were systematically converted to an Excel text format. Colour coding was used to assist in processing the results, which facilitated the formation of similarities and the discovery of the most significant themes. This type of coding simplified the analysis and provided clarity for the processing of the data.

6 RESEARCH RESULTS

This survey and all the figures displaying the research results, compiled by Webropol, were conducted in Finnish. The results and the thorough insights and explanations are presented in English text form.

6.1 Respondents

The survey was sent to 72 companies and actors involved in the ERG project, of which a total of 30 responded to the survey. The response rate of the survey was thus 41%. Although efforts were made to reach as many respondents as possible, the response rate was ultimately lower than desired. However, the survey questions had been drafted in such a comprehensive way that these few answers from different companies revealed important elements for the work.

The survey was widely attended by companies and actors from various industries (Figure 10), the largest of which was the food service sector with 27%. The rest of the industries were distributed as follows; Tourism industry 17%, "Other" industries 17%, Food and beverage sector 13%, Agricultural sector 13%, Event industry 7% and Craft / Design industry 7%. Companies that had responded to "other industry" came from association, advertising agency, welfare industry, sports club and education & performance industry.
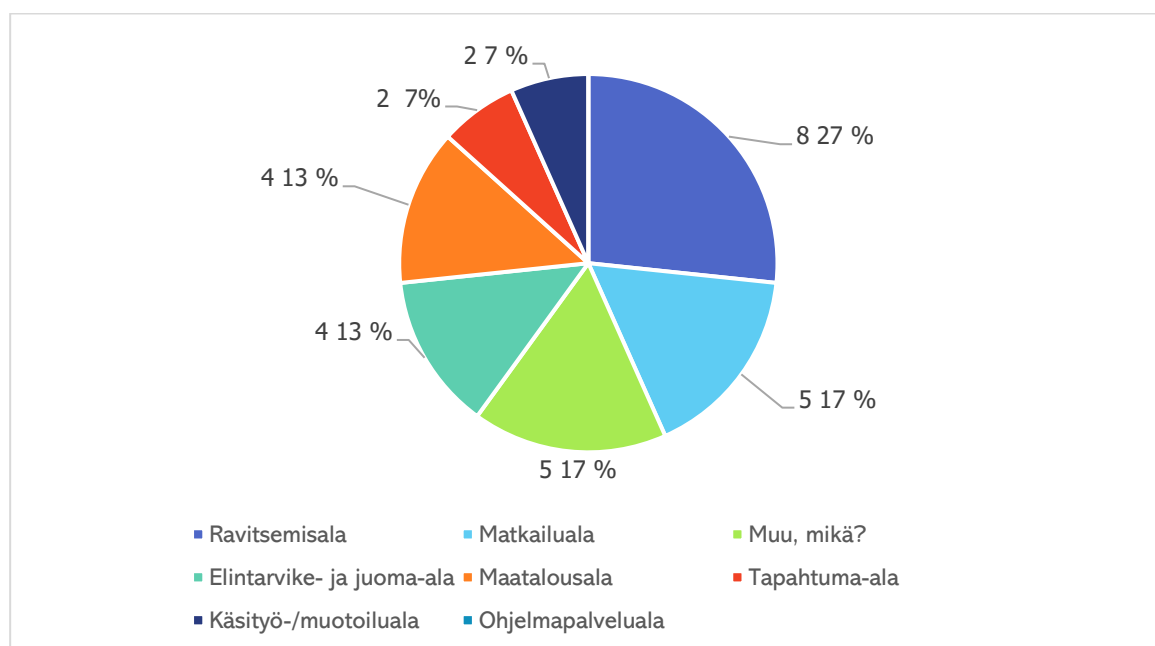

FIGURE 10. Respondents by their principal industry (n=30)

In another background question, respondents were asked about the size of the company they were operating in (Figure 11). The majority of the respondents belonged to micro-sized enterprises (83%), in other words, the company employed less than 10 people. 10% of the respondents said they represented a small enterprise with less than 50 employees. Lastly, 7% belonged to a medium sized enterprise, with 50-249 employees. None of the respondents identified being part of a large
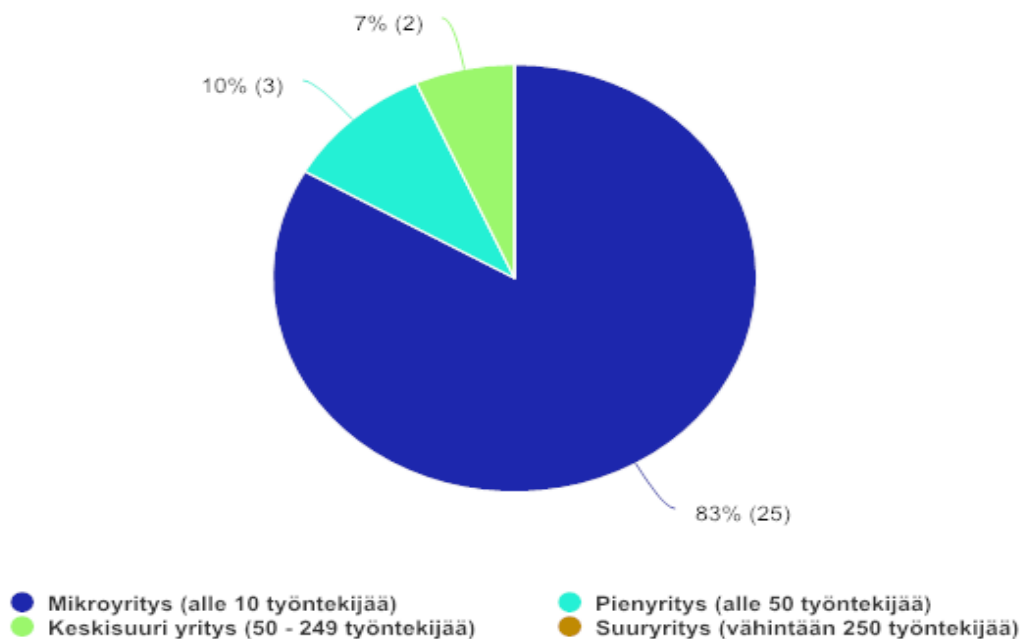
company with more than 250 employees.

FIGURE 11. Respondents by their company's size (n=30)

All the companies involved in the ERG project operate in the Northern Savonia province, which consists of 19 different municipalities. When the respondents were asked about the location of their company (Figure 12), the majority answered Kuopio, which is the provincial center of Northern Savonia. Also, five individual responses came from significantly smaller municipalities which were Iisalmi, Kiuruvesi, Pielavesi, Siilinjärvi and Sonkajärvi.
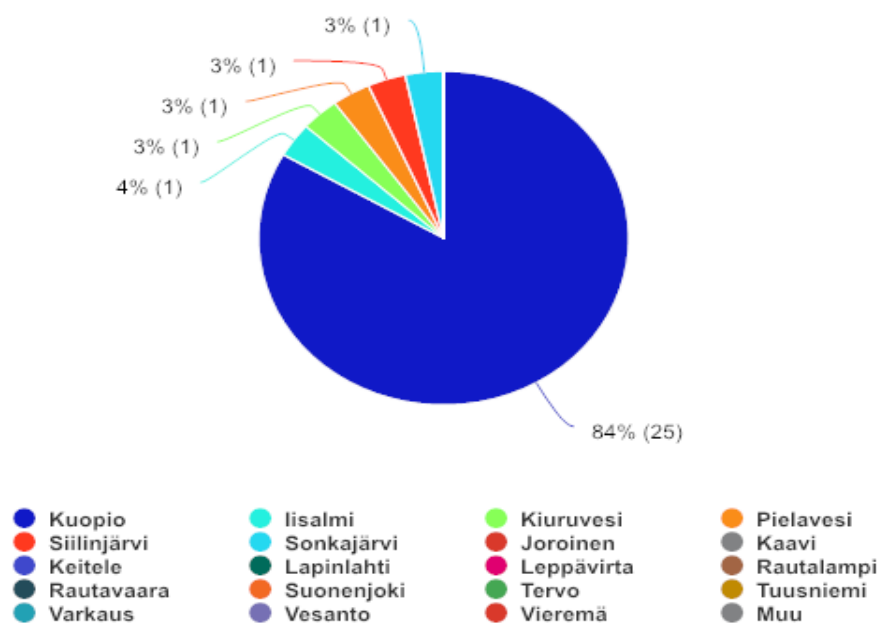

FIGURE 12. Respondents by their company's location (n=30)

6.2 Trainings

4. What thematic trainings has your company participated in?

Communication & marketing webinars were clearly perceived as most attractive by the companies, with 47% of them participating. Other training that garnered steady votes included event development workshops (33%), storytelling (28%), productization webinars in the tourism industry (28%), innovation workshops (28%), SATOA Food Festival trainings & other event trainings (28%) and product development & packaging (23%). By far the least interest was in webinars related to the use of local food (14,3%) and on the topic of sustainability (9%). In total, the options were selected 51 times, so the responding companies had participated in an average of 2.4 different trainings. All in all, it can be said that the interest of companies in different trainings is very divided. (Table 1.)

TABLE 1. Participation of respondents in the ERG project's trainings (n=21)

	n	Percent
Product development & packaging (i.a. Local Food Gift -program)	5	23,8%
Sustainability	2	9,5%
Communication & marketing webinars	10	47,6%
Storytelling	6	28,6%
Event development workshops	7	33,3%
Productization webinars in the tourism industry	6	28,6%
Innovation workshops	6	28,6%
Webinars related to use of local food	3	14,3%
SATOA Food festival trainings & other event trainings	6	28,6%

6.3 Communication

5. What ERG materials has your company utilized?

More than half of all the respondents had used window stickers, brochures and digital materials in their business. The concrete materials, to be put on the company's premises had been utilized slightly more than the digital materials. In total, the options had been selected 53 times, so the responding companies had taken advantage of approximately two different ERG materials. (Figure 13.)

Six companies had created their own ERG related material. Two made their own logos, one of which had attached it to the labels of their products while the other used it on company's menus, emails and offers. A few of the companies mentioned making their own brochures, stickers and pictures.

One mentioned it had produced their own ERG templates at the beginning of the project, as the respondent stated that it had taken too long for the official materials to arrive.

Only one respondent had produced a completely different type of material which, however, was part of the ERG project's supply. The marketing material had been created for the company's own ancillary service named "Feeling Good" well-being days. All in all, this shows that the ERG material has been utilized quite extensively.
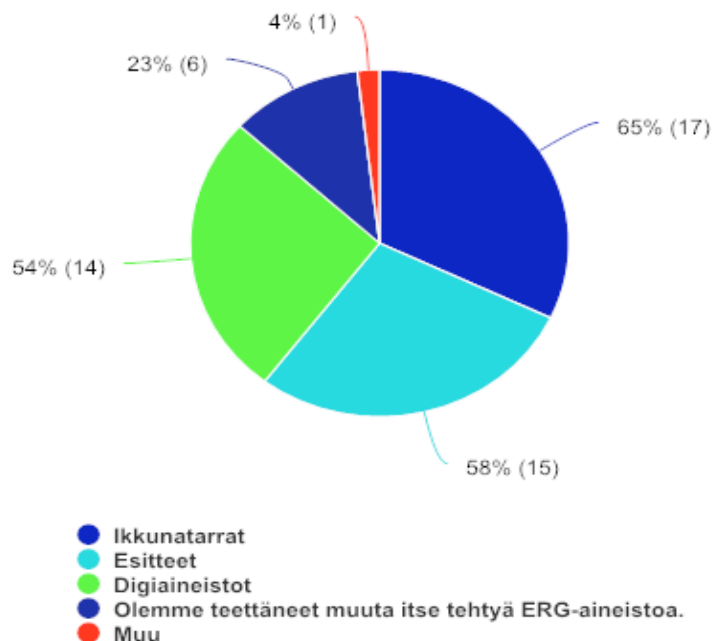

FIGURE 13. ERG material utilized by respondents (n=26)

6. Is participation in the ERG project visible on the company's premises?

63% of the companies responded that the ERG project was visible on their company's premises. The majority said they would bring visibility with window stickers, but several also mentioned brochures and posters. Otherwise, the ERG was featured in menus, pennants, stands, bags, QR codes, book, beach flag and product packaging. In general, it can be said that the involvement in the ERG project was comprehensively visible in more than half of the companies' premises. (Figure 14.)
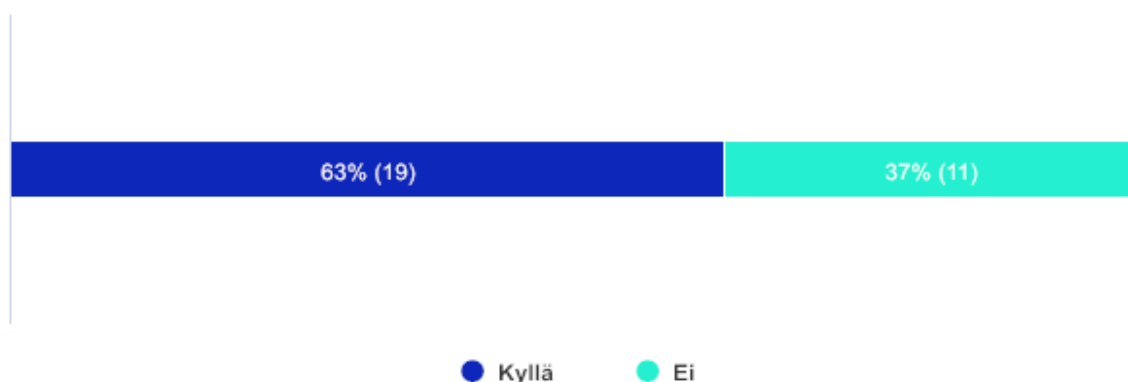

FIGURE 14. Respondents on whether the ERG project is visible at the company's premises (n=30)

7. Has your company benefited from the visibility of the TasteSavo website or its social media channels?

62% of the companies felt that they had benefited from the visibility of the TasteSavo website and its social media channels (Figure 15), which are the official communication channels of the project. The companies were pleased with the fact that their products and services had been promoted through various channels. The channels mentioned were TasteSavo website, its social media accounts, as well as the official blog dedicated to the ERG. One company even mentioned they had received requests for the trainings they offer. Visibility had thus brought tangible benefits to the company.
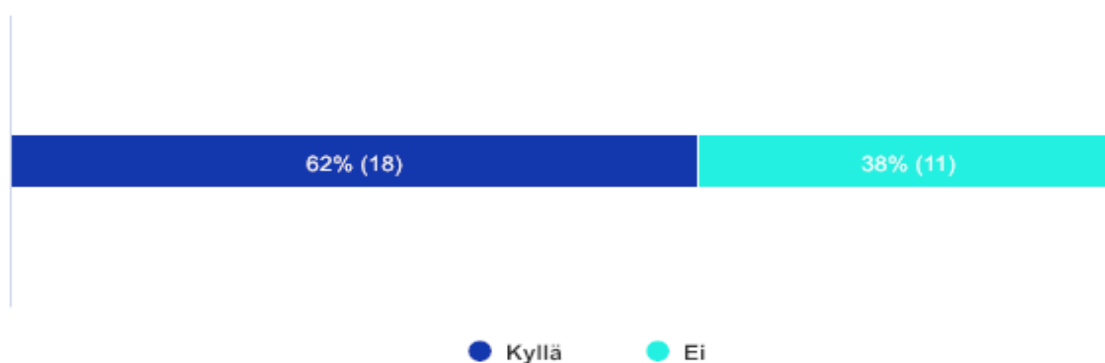

FIGURE 15. Respondents on whether they had benefited from the visibility provided by the project (n=29)

6.4   Food tourism products

8. Has your company productized own program content / food tourism products for the celebratory season's program?

The vast majority of the companies, with 67%, had not produced their own program or food tourism products according to the festive season (Figure 16). The question does not clarify why food tourism products had not been produced by many, but it is possible that the prevailing pandemic situation may have played a part in the matter. However, some companies reported producing the following:

> *"Food tours and food walks"*
>
> *"Feeling good days and excursions"*
>
> *"Extended dinner, themed menus"*
>
> *"Theme days, food tours, storytelling lunches"*
>
> *"Taste Savonia goes to Kauppahalli autumn 2020"*
>
> *"Tasting around Kuopio"*
>
> *"Traditional event (highlighting food tourism in the Savonia region)"*

> *"The last part of the Valakonen Aries trilogy; Spy Thriller in collaboration with Restaurant Musta Lammas."*
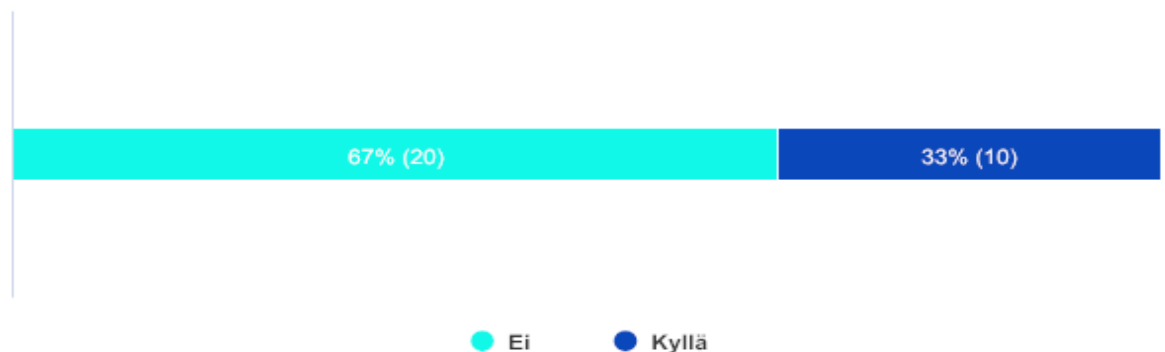

FIGURE 16. Respondents on whether they had produced their own food tourism products (n=30)

9. What is the number of new program content / food tourism products being produced by your company?

Question 9 was a follow-up to the eighth question and was only responded by the 33% who previously had said to create own ERG-related products. All the companies reported producing 1-4 pieces of program content or food tourism products. (Figure 17.)
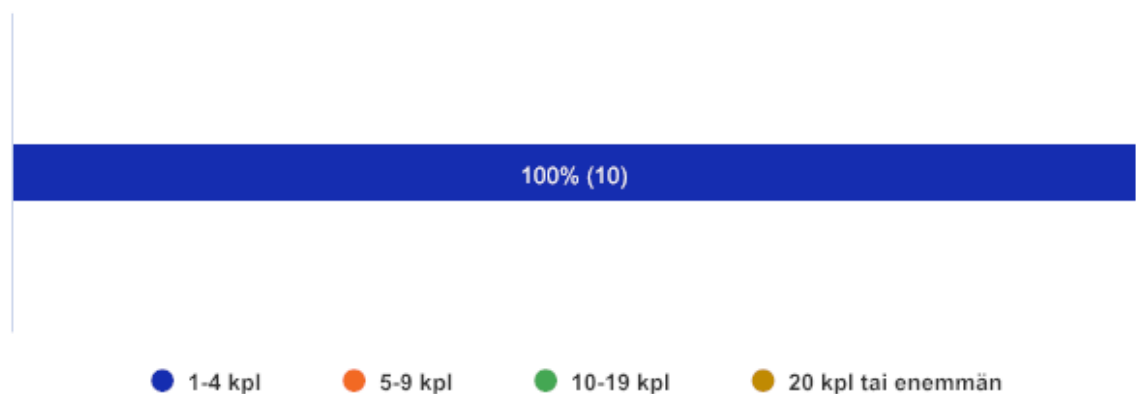
FIGURE 17. Number of program content / food tourism products created by the respondents (n=10)

10. How popular have the program content / food tourism products been and what are the most sought-after products?

The question was responded by 10 different companies. Answering to the question was clearly hampered by the fact that it sought to get answers to two slightly different questions at a time. Thus, some respondents spoke either about the demand for their food tourism products in general or about what their most specifically demanded products were. Only a few respondents answered the question in its entirety.

The most popular food tourism products from various companies were: Tasting tour, fishing, church boat rowing, dining in nature, sauna, food tour, wild herb course, trade counsellor's themed lunch and event in the market hall. When asked about the demand for the products, the effects of the Covid-19 were strongly highlighted in the responses. Some felt that demand was noticeable, but due to the pandemic, it had not been possible to meet the demand as desired. While others stated that due to Covid-19 there was no demand at all. Companies commented the demand e.g., in the following words:

> " There is demand and need but Covid has limited it."

> "Due to covid restrictions, people do not move / use services enough to meet the demand for products. Tourism, especially internationally, has virtually come to an end over the past year."

> "There is no demand. Covid."

However, interestingly, unlike any other response, one company had found demand even surprisingly high.

> "The interest in our food tours has even been surprisingly high. The food sightseeing tour is of most interest."

6.5 Use of local food

Use of local food-themed questions (11, 12, 13 & 14) were only asked from companies operating in the food service sector, such as cafes and restaurants. As the questions were answered by a very small number of companies, the answers are clearly more indicative.

11. What is your company's current local food utilization rate?

The average local food utilization rate of the responding companies was 46,9%, which is not too far from the median. Overall, the responses ranged from 20% to 70%. (Table 2.)

TABLE 2. Local food utilization rate of the responding companies (n=8)

	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Percents	20	70	46,9	45	18,9

12. Has your company increased the use of local food since the ERG project?

Precisely half of the responding companies said to increase the use of local food with the ERG project (Figure 18). The factors influencing the growth of local food were justified as follows:

"We prefer to use more local meat, sausages"

"The Puijo concept was created during the project but would have been done without the ERG (at Puijo Tower Restaurant, the share of local food is currently about 80% all year round)."

"The network of food producers has grown"

"Local connections have been established"
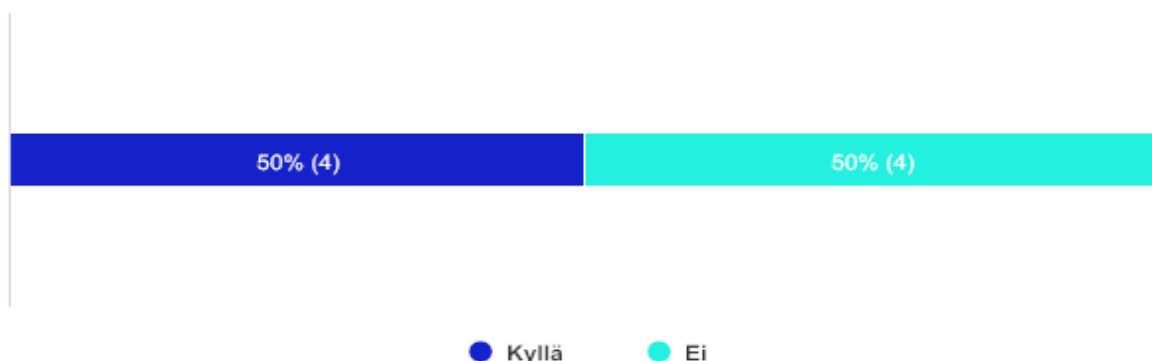
FIGURE 18. Respondents on whether their use of local food had increased (n=8)

13. Is there an ERG dish / menu / food available in your company?

Half of the responding companies confirmed, they had created a menu suitable for the ERG theme (Figure 19). As an example, one of the respondents answered the question as follows:

"Musta Lammas: Experience, Isä Camillo: ERG menu, Puijo Tower Restaurant: Local food menu. Haminalahti's new product is also based entirely on local food and history, as well as respect for the region."
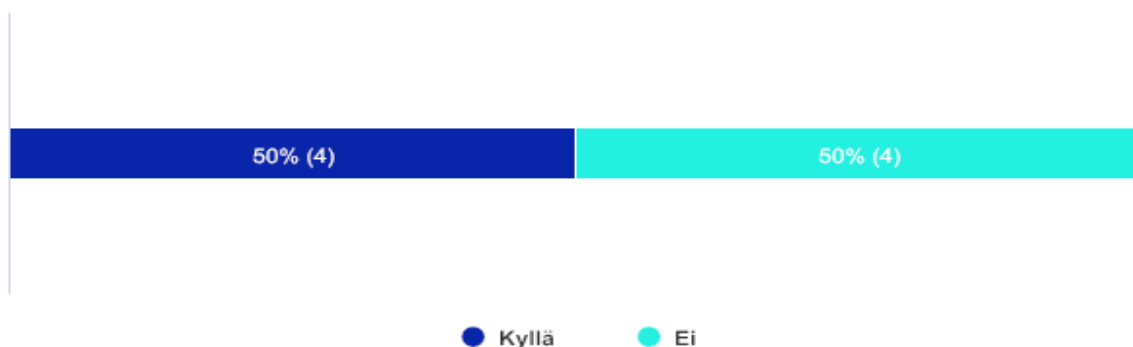
FIGURE 19. Respondents according to whether they had produced ERG dish / menu / food in general (n=8)

14. How popular have the products and dishes containing local food been?

When asked about the demand for products and dishes containing local food, only 4 companies shared their thoughts on the issue. One of the respondents had understood the question clearly differently than intended. The other three companies had quite different answers. One had experienced that the demand for dishes in connection to the ERG did not differ from the demand for dishes that were normally offered on the menu. Another stated that the products and dishes certainly brought added value to the company. While a third respondent said that the ERG dishes had gained popularity, but at the same time questioned, whether many customers would make their choices based on the locality of the ingredients.

6.6   ERG benefits

15. How has your company experienced the benefits of the ERG projects?

When asked about the companies' experiences concerning the benefits of the ERG projects, 25 different companies shared their thoughts. The majority of respondents felt that they had actively benefited from the projects. Only a few companies said that due to Covid-19, they had not experienced any benefits.

Three key themes emerged clearly from the responses, which were networking, business development and visibility. Many felt that the ERG projects had promoted networking between different actors in the region. Extensive networks had brought new contacts to companies and increased a sense of community, which was perceived as a particularly valuable resource in terms of the prevailing pandemic. Trainings, workshops, webinars, consultation and general assistance provided by the projects to develop the companies' business, were found very useful. In addition, the visibility brought by the projects was highly appreciated by several companies.

> *"We have benefited from an extensive and diverse networking platform, an interesting framework story and excellent training."*

> *"Visibility, new contacts with various actors in the region."*

> *"I have got new contacts and networks. I have gained jobs in terms of training and hosting gigs. I have a better understanding of the field, that helps me in my own work as an educator and performer."*

> *"Encouragement, community support during difficult times."*

16. How would you assess the impact of the ERG on customer numbers?

On a scale of 1 to 10, companies assessed the impact of the ERG on customer numbers from 4 to 10. The mean ended up being 5.7, which is not too far from the median (Table 3). Despite the results, the real impact of the project on customer numbers is difficult to assess, given the current pandemic and the challenges it poses.

TABLE 3. Respondents' assessment of the effects of the ERG on customer numbers (n=25)

Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
4	10	5,7	5	1,3

6.7   Responsibility

17. Have the ERG projects sparked thinking more responsibly?

53% of the companies said that the projects had enhanced their responsible thinking (Figure 20). The emphasis in the responses was most on the importance of responsibility in business. With the know-how gained through the projects, companies had been able to enhance their responsibility. In addition, several stated that the importance of it had increased in the company's operations. Concrete examples of increasing responsibility were given as follows:

> "With ERG, we updated our values, with responsibility being the first to be mentioned. It guides every choice we make."

> "It has contributed to productization."

> "Making responsibility of the event transparent."

The increase in responsibility was also reflected in the use of local food by the companies. Three of them said that since the projects, favouring local food had become even more important for their business. A few also mentioned that the handling of waste was taken into account more.
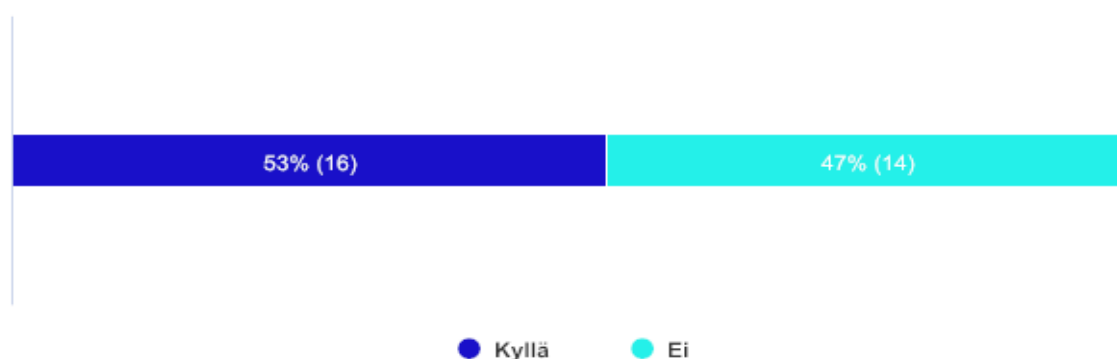

● Kyllä   ● Ei

FIGURE 20. Respondents on whether their responsible thinking had increased (n=30)

6.8   Feedback

18. What is your overall satisfaction with the content provided by the project entirety?

23 companies shared their experiences on their overall satisfaction concerning the content provided by the project. The information gained through the questions was divided into positive, neutral, and negative experiences. The majority of the companies had experienced the contents of the project positively. Positive feedback particularly came from the diversity of the content, which emerged in several responses.

> *"There has been a lot on offer and now there has been a good opportunity to im-prove the company's product development and marketing."*

> *"I have been satisfied. I hope Covid will allow the events of summer, autumn and winter 2021 to take place."*

Some companies experienced moderate satisfaction with the content. The response of a few compa-nies revealed that the contents have reflected in a positive way, but due to complications with Covid-19, it has been difficult to assess their usability. A few respondents also felt that the contents were reasonably good but had not defined in detail what they had been missing.

> *" There has been a lot of everything, but exceptional time has limited the exploitation of everything. I haven't had time to delve into this and there hasn't been time to at-tend the trainings, no matter how interested."*

> *"It's okay, but the wow effect is missing."*

Four companies expressed dissatisfaction with the content of the project. Two of them felt that the contents were going beyond the focus of their business i.e., the contents did not meet the needs of their companies. More feedback was given concerning the fact, that one had perceived the content detached and foreign to them, while another company had not experienced any benefit from the content so far.

> *"These contents are a little past our focus and the damn corona messed up a lot."*

> *"Not very satisfied, partly because of the corona, partly because of the content, it remained detached and distant."*

19. Opportunity to give feedback and / or make wishes:

Lastly, 17 companies provided feedback and wishes for the development of the project. The re-sponses were mainly feedback, both positive and negative. However, the majority of it being posi-tive. The companies had clearly understood the challenges posed by Covid-19 in implementing the project, and many of them praised the performance of the project during the exceptional time. Sev-eral expressed their joy in joining the project and hoped that the work that had already been done

as well as the cooperation network, would continue to be utilized in the future. A few companies also commented the following:

> *"This has brought really good and international recognition and opportunities to the Northern Savonia region. Also certainly created faith in entrepreneurs."*

> *"Perhaps the regional attitude towards responsibility, cooperation and local food has improved during the projects. It is impossible to assess what impact the projects would have had without covid."*

> *"No one could have done anything to covid, and it could not help but to affect the operation of the project. The offerings have been extensive and also a lot depends on the entrepreneur's own prioritization. I was afraid that I was too far from the center, but it turned out to be the other way around. I got more than I expected."*

According to two companies, there was still room for improvement concerning the project's communication. One of them expressed dissatisfaction with the information and communication provided at the beginning of the project. According to the company, communication had been both poorly planned and implemented. However, it is not entirely clear from the feedback whether the company refers to the internal or external communication.

Another company clearly expressed its disappointment with the external communication of the project. The company stated that the marketing had not reached even the residents of Kuopio properly, which is why many of them were not aware of the ERG recognition received by the region. One company also raised its opinion concerning the extend of the project. Due to its size and multi-directional entirety it began to feel confusing.

The following wishes were expressed for the continuation of the ERG project:

> *"If SATOA comes, its pricing should be addressed. The year of Covid punishes a lot of restaurants and you can't not afford anything. Many acquaintances have said that they will not be participating because the result can be + -0 or even minus if people are afraid to move. I am thinking about the same thing."*

> *"Training and support for small actors"*

> *"Centralized pop-up stores in the Matkus shopping center with the same idea as it was under Christmas."*

> *"I might have wanted help creating new concepts: a visual look, etc."*

> *"I would have liked to bring recognition to Northern Savonia more as a province and to jointly define its gastronomic goals and (food tourism) strengths and to build a brand in which the various actors would have contributed."*

7   CONCLUSIONS

7.1   SWOT analysis

The conclusions drawn from the research results were highlighted by using the SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is a strategy tool that includes an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of an organization, project, or a study. SWOT analysis is a multi-purpose evaluation method and it can be used to examine the full scope of an activity or to observe only one area of activity. However, when using the analysis, it is important to be able to precisely delimit the object to be analysed in each case, so that the results of the analysis are as good and comparable as possible. (Lindroos & Lohivesi 2010.)

With this SWOT analysis (Figure 21), I aim to highlight the current and most significant strengths, weaknesses, future opportunities and threats of the project. The findings are based specifically on the research results obtained from the project's partner companies and correspond to the research question set for the work. The results of the SWOT analysis are used to assist in making development proposals for the continuation of the project.

STRENGTHS
- Active communication in a wide range of different digital platforms
- Comprehensive and diverse selection of content
- Extensive network

WEAKNESSES
- The content provided does not meet all the needs
- Responding to a crisis
- Lack of impact on customer numbers
- Lack of impact on the production of food tourism products

OPPORTUNITIES
- Enhancing communication
- Updating practises
- Improvement in the pandemic situation
- Increase in domestic traveling

THREATS
- COVID-19
- Communication does not reach people regionally, nationally and / or internationally
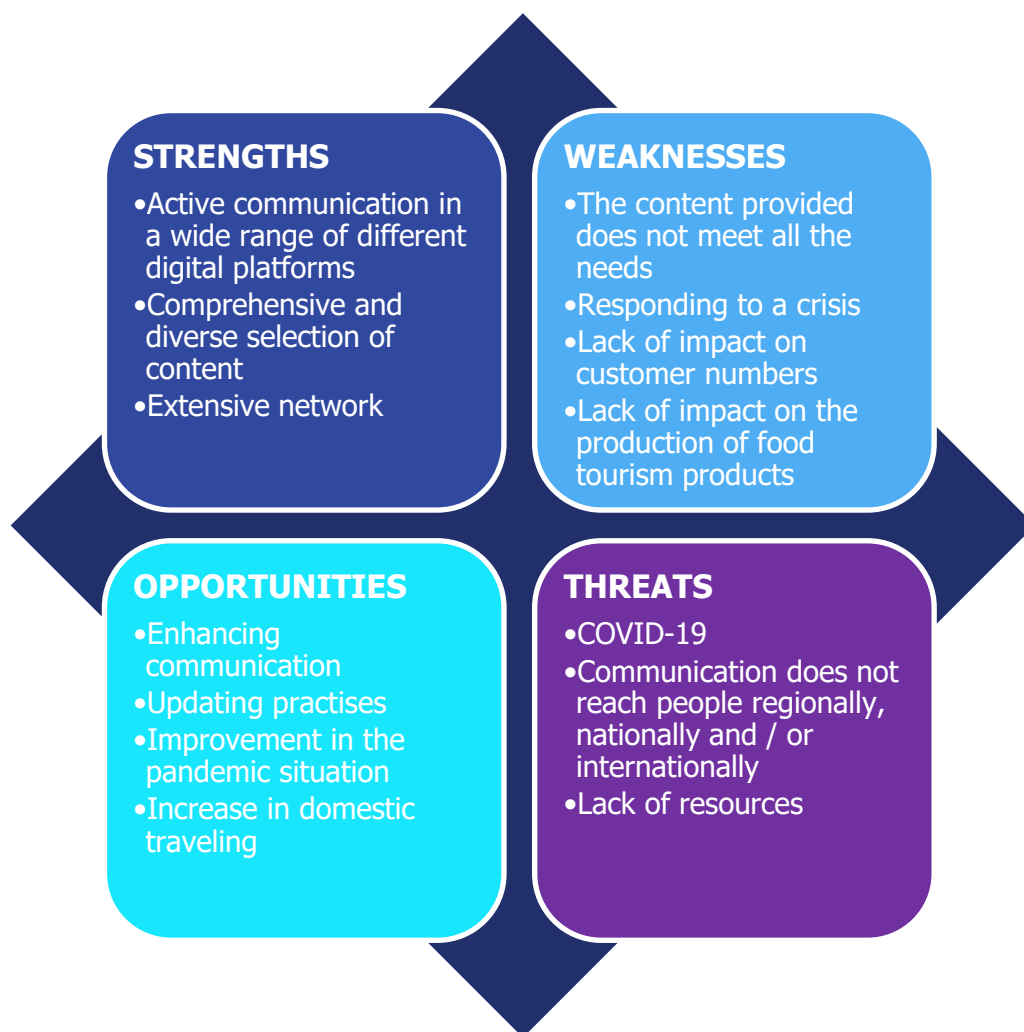- Lack of resources

FIGURE 21. SWOT analysis of the ERG project

The strengths of the ERG project include the extensive cooperation network operating around the project, which enables new kind of visibility and multidimensional support for the companies and actors involved in it. Another project's strength is active and multi-channel communication, which has already brought visibility and benefits to its partners. The final clear strength of the project is the comprehensively constructed content that it provides for its partners.

The main weakness of the project is the lack of ability to respond to crises, with particular reference to Covid-19 and its large-scale impact in several different parts of the project. However, admittedly, it was almost impossible to prepare for such a crisis in advance and it is unfortunate how much it has affected the overall functioning of the project. Another weakness is the content of the project. Although the content is abundant, it has not met the needs of all the project participants, which is noticeable in the results of several research questions. For example, several project participants have made their own ERG material, which may indicate that there is not enough official project material available. For this reason, it would be worthwhile to do more research on companies' real need for the content. Regarding the remaining two weaknesses, due to the pandemic and its effects, it is difficult to assess their validity.

A clear opportunity for the project can be seen as an improvement in the pandemic situation, which will liberate and facilitate the operation of the project. Other opportunities include updating the project's operating methods in accordance with the rapidly changing global situation and strengthening communication, as due to Covid-19 the importance of it has gained more emphasis. Lastly, increase in domestic traveling may also provide opportunities, as it can affect the demand and make up for the shortage of international travellers.

The potential threats to the project will undoubtedly include Covid-19 and the deterioration of the pandemic situation. Other potential threats include the lack of resources for both, the project and those involved in the project. Needless to say, recent times have been tough for many entrepreneurs. The last potential threat of the project is the poor reach of communication at the regional, national and international levels.

7.2   Development proposals

Based on the research results and the conducted SWOT analysis, the project already has a lot of strengths to lean on. Despite the challenging times, the majority of the partner companies have found the project in some ways useful and noted the potential it has especially for a Covid-free future. However, there is no denying that the Covid-19 has had a major impact on the implementation of the project. Covid's devastating effects on the project became apparent in almost every question presented to the companies, whether it was participation in training, customer numbers, the production of food tourism products or weak demand in general. As Covid-19 has clearly affected the functionality of the project and weakened the benefits it has to offer for the companies, in my opinion currently the most important thing is to provide extensive support to the project partners. When the effects of the Covid-19 are minimized and new ways of operating are found, the project partners have the energy and resources to invest in the project, which at best also leads to better recovery of the company's own business.

One of the most significant things that the project could offer for its partners, is training that focuses on enhancing risk management and specifically on minimizing the impacts of Covid-19. Providing companies with concrete tips for operating safely and effectively under the influence of the pandemic, can improve their opportunities to grow demand and of course, make the business more responsible. In addition to the current challenges, it would be important to give the companies an opportunity to prepare for the future. Training that focuses on post-crisis recovery and maximizing business opportunities could bring companies new know-how and energy to strengthen their business after a deep crisis. When the market then eventually reopens, companies would have the full capacity to operate and continue to revitalize food tourism in Northern Savonia.

With the ERG project being extensive and well over halfway through, the schedule and resource challenges will quickly be met in the development work. For this reason, I would suggest that the project would utilize more educational institutions and especially the expertise of Savonia UAS students. With the help of students in the field, development processes can be accelerated, and new perspectives can be gained. The strengthening of such cooperation would of course also have a positive effect on the students' own professional development, which in the future may have a surprising effect on the growth of food tourism in the region.

As a final proposal, I would urge the project to carry out a more detailed study of the needs of companies for different ERG contents. Although many companies in the feedback praised the comprehensive content that came in favour of the project, some results showed poor usability of it. By accurately mapping the needs, it will be easier to generate real benefits for the companies while saving the project's own resources for better use. All the development proposals compiled, are summarized in the Figure 22.

Additional trainings

- COVID Safe Business trainings
- Crisis Management trainings
- Post-crisis Recovery trainings

Active cooperation with educational institutions

- Utilizing the expertise of students in the field, to accelerate development processes and to discover new solutions

Accurate Content mapping

- Mapping the companies expectations of the ERG content, to be certain to meet their real needs
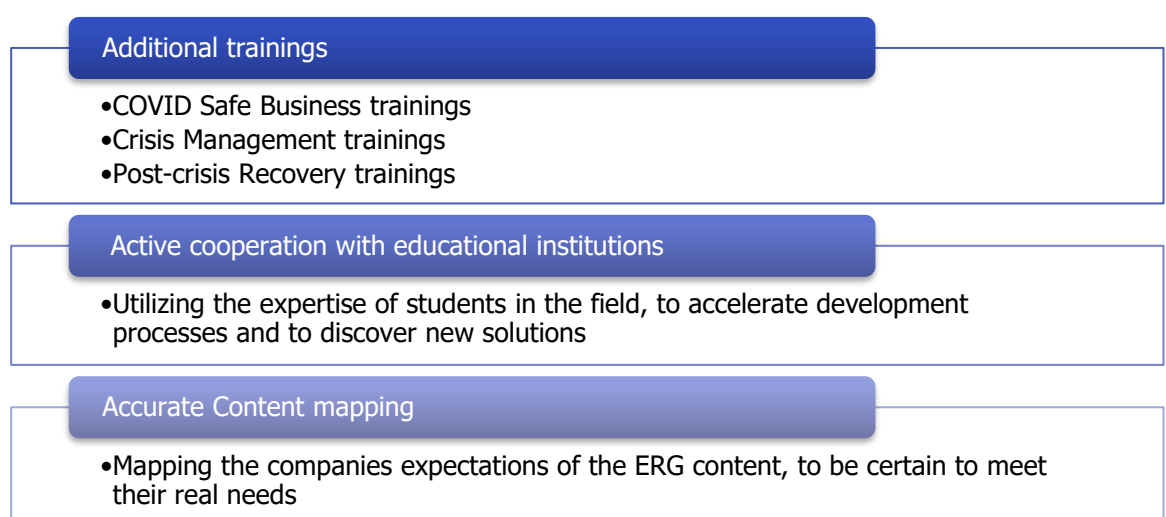
FIGURE 22. Development proposals for the ERG project

7.3   Reliability and validity of the research

The functionality and quality of a research are measured by two concepts, which are validity and reliability. Research validity refers to the ability of a meter or research method to measure what the research is intended to measure. The validity should be considered at the planning stage of the research. This means precisely defining concepts, population and variables, carefully collecting data and designing the metric and ensuring that metric questions cover the entire research problem. (Vilkka 2015, chapter 7.)

The validity of this study is good, due to accurately and truthfully delineated research problem. The sources used in the work were carefully considered and appropriate to the topic. The population under study was clear and well-defined from the beginning. The research method of the study was carefully chosen and it achieved what was to be studied. The validity of the survey was enhanced by the fact that the survey included also open-ended questions, so the respondents 'responses were broader and more thoughtful and thus gave more content than a multiple-choice survey alone would have given.

The reliability of the research means the accuracy of the results, in other words, the ability of the measurement to give non-random results and the reproducibility of the measurement results. This means that when repeating a measurement on the same person, the exact same measurement result is obtained regardless of the researcher. (Vilkka 2015, chapter 7.)

The reliability of this study is satisfactory. Unfortunately, the study did not achieve as many participants as expected, which leads to a decline in the reliability. However, the survey questions had been drafted in such a comprehensive way that these few responses from different companies revealed important elements for the work. Otherwise, the reliability was increased by carefully planning and reviewing the questionnaire together with the client. Despite the diligence, few of the survey questions were understood differently by the respondents, which again led to a decline in the reliability.

Another factor that may have affected the reliability of the study, concerns the data collection which took place via phone. Although the same questionnaire structure was followed by phone as in the emailed survey, it could still have an impact on the reliability of the study. However, efforts were made to add the respondents' answers to the survey as accurately as possible, and the preservation of the core message was strictly adhered to.

Concerning this study, it is important to emphasize its strong time dependence. As the project is currently underway and will continue until the end of year 2021, the opinions of the participants in the study may vary very actively and therefore change the research results. The severe pandemic situation, which was at its worst in the implementation phase of this study, also adds to the strong time-bound nature of the research.

8   REFLECTION

The purpose of this thesis was to conduct a study on the effects of the project "European Region of Gastronomy Kuopio Region 2020-21" on its cooperation partners. The thesis was carried out in accordance with the needs of the client, Savonia University of Applied Sciences. The aim was to discover the partners' experiences of the project, on the basis of which an assessment of the project's functionality was formed. The completed study will be utilized in the further development work of the ERG project.

The conducted study gives the project an external evaluation of its current activities and evaluates its practices from outside the project, providing new insights. Although the conclusions of the survey were rough due to its rather weak sample, the survey provides an idea of how the partners have experienced the project and what changes would make the experiences even better in the future. The study allows the project to look at its activities and notice things they have not paid attention to before. Hopefully, the development proposals compiled from the conclusions, will be of real benefit to the client and provide positive changes to the project.

The thesis process has been extensive, but great interest in the topic and a well-defined goal led to maintaining motivation throughout the process. The official launch of the thesis took place in September 2020, however active work began in the first months of 2021. The process was prolonged, due to the lack of accessibility of sources caused by the Coronavirus and simultaneously working as an intern. A variation of difficulties in the progress were created by the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic, which was at its worst at the stage of conducting the research. Despite the schedule challenges, conscientious and motivated work approach took my thesis continuously forward.

Overall, I am quite pleased with the outcome of my thesis. It responds to the research problem posed and in my opinion, the development proposals formed are justified and feasible. However, with the knowledge I now possess, I would approach a couple of things differently. Most importantly, I would implement a carefully planned schedule which would facilitate the even distribution of the tasks and guarantee extra time for the refinement stage. Setting a precise plan would certainly have evened out the workload and potentially further improved the outcome of the thesis. However, even though the schedule was tight at times, I personally feel that a moderate amount of pressure boosted my performance.

The framework and its sub-areas could have been further expanded, for example by displaying the food culture of Northern Savonia and the importance of food tourism for Finnish tourism. Nevertheless, I believe I managed to choose the most relevant topics for my work in terms of the frame of reference. The questionnaire could have also been further refined to maximize its reliability. By testing the survey an extra couple of times, it could have highlighted its weaknesses and led to improvement of its efficiency. Lastly, although the Covid-19 undoubtedly complicated the research process, I could have sought to increase the sample in other ways as well. By paying a visit to some of the companies in person, an increase of the amount of respondents, as well as more qualitative data for the analysis could have been achieved. However, this could have potentially led the work to become too large and burdensome to execute alone.

Overall, the thesis process has been very educational and a professionally nurturing journey. At the beginning, the scale of the work felt a bit daunting, especially as I had set my own expectations so high. When I began to write the theory, producing the text was really forced at first, but little by little my confidence grew and at times I even reached a state of flow. Writing the theory provided me with an opportunity to become fully acquainted with food tourism, the ERG recognition and development work, which greatly increased my knowledge of these topics. Carrying out the thesis in English was challenging at times, but I felt that as a result of the process, my language skills were strengthened and I was able to produce text that was appropriate in style.

By carrying out the work as a research-based development work, it provided an opportunity to practice the knowledge learned at school concerning research and development activities. The work taught me to outline the research process as a whole and to distinguish the different stages in more detail. It showed me the complexity of the research process and how significant each research phase is for a successful outcome. The actual research of the thesis itself turned out to be the most laborious and challenging phase, but at the same time the period that reinforced much of my own perseverance. Creating accurate and work-relevant conclusions was initially rather challenging. However, the utilization of the SWOT analysis tool proved very useful in forming conclusions, as well as tools like the Webropol showed to be a big asset. Through the process with active use of these tools, their handling and utilization was clearly strengthened.

To conclude, working on this assignment was an intense learning process and valuable experience. The most important lesson I learned was related to the developmental nature of the work itself. I have gained a better understanding of how a successful operation is run, with all the aspects related to it. I am looking forward to future projects, with confidence gained from this experience, especially influenced by the dynamics and ever-changing circumstances of the "new" world we live in.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The ERG survey

ERG-hankkeiden vaikutukset

> 📱 Pakolliset kentät merkitään asteriskilla (*) ja ne tulee täyttää lomakkeen viimeistelemiseksi.

Taustatiedot

1. Yrityksenne pääasiallinen toimiala? *

- ○ Ravitsemisala
- ○ Matkailuala
- ○ Elintarvike- ja juoma-ala
- ○ Maatalousala
- ○ Tapahtuma-ala
- ○ Ohjelmapalveluala
- ○ Käsityö-/muotoiluala
- ○ Muu, mikä? [_____]

2. Yrityksenne koko? *

- ○ Mikroyritys (alle 10 työntekijää)
- ○ Pienyritys (alle 50 työntekijää)
- ○ Keskisuuri yritys (50 - 249 työntekijää)
- ○ Suuryritys (vähintään 250 työntekijää)

3. Yrityksenne sijainti? *

- ◯ Kuopio
- ◯ Iisalmi
- ◯ Joroinen
- ◯ Kaavi
- ◯ Keitele
- ◯ Kiuruvesi
- ◯ Lapinlahti
- ◯ Leppävirta
- ◯ Pielavesi
- ◯ Rautalampi
- ◯ Rautavaara
- ◯ Siilinjärvi
- ◯ Sonkajärvi
- ◯ Suonenjoki
- ◯ Tervo
- ◯ Tuusniemi
- ◯ Varkaus
- ◯ Vesanto
- ◯ Vieremä
- ◯ Muu, mikä?

Koulutus

4. Minkä teemaisiin koulutuksiin yrityksenne on osallistunut?

- ☐ Tuotekehitys ja pakkaaminen (mm. Local Food Gift -ohjelma)
- ☐ Vastuullisuus

- ☐ Viestintä- ja markkinoitiwebinaarit
- ☐ Tarinallistaminen
- ☐ Tapahtumien kehittämistyöpajat
- ☐ Matkailualan tuotteistamiswebinaarit
- ☐ Innovaatiotyöpajat
- ☐ Lähiruoan käyttöön liittyvät webinaarit
- ☐ SATOA Food festivaalien sparraukset ja muut tapahtumasparraukset

Viestintä

5. Mitä seuraavista ERG-aineistoista yrityksenne on hyödyntänyt?

- ☐ Digiaineistot
- ☐ Ikkunatarrat
- ☐ Esitteet
- ☐ Olemme teettäneet muuta itse tehtyä ERG-aineistoa. Mitä?
- ☐ Muu, mikä?

6. Onko ERG-hankkeessa mukana olo näkyvillä yrityksen tiloissa?

- ◯ Kyllä, miten?
- ◯ Ei

7. Onko yrityksenne hyötynyt Tastesavo -verkkosivun tai somekanavien näkyvyydestä?

- ◯ Kyllä, miten?
- ◯ Ei

Ruokamatkailutuotteet

8. Oletteko tuotteistaneet omia ohjelmasisältöjä/ruokamatkailutuotteita juhlakauden ohjelmaan?

○ Kyllä, mitä? [   ]

○ Ei

9. Uusien ohjelmasisältöjen/ruokamatkailutuotteiden lukumäärä?
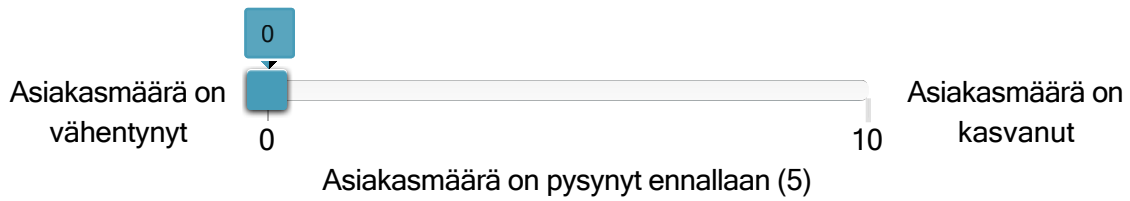
○ 1-4 kpl

○ 5-9 kpl

○ 10-19 kpl

○ 20 kpl tai enemmän

10. Kuinka kysyttyjä ohjelmasisällöt/ruokamatkailutuotteet ovat olleet ja mitkä ovat kysytyimmät tuotteet?

ERG hyödyt

15. Millaista hyötyä olette kokeneet saavanne ERG-hankkeista?

16. Miten arvioisit ERG:n vaikutusta asiakasmääriin?

```
                      0
Asiakasmäärä on    ┌──┐                              Asiakasmäärä on
   vähentynyt      └──┴──────────────────────────┐     kasvanut
                   0                             10

        Asiakasmäärä on pysynyt ennallaan (5)
```

Vastuullisuus

17. Ovatko ERG-hankkeet herättäneet ajattelemaan vastuullisemmin?

◯ Kyllä, miten? [   ]

◯ Ei

Palaute

18. Yleinen tyytyväisyys hankekokonaisuuden tarjoamiin sisältöihin? (Lista hankkeen sisällöistä)

19. Mahdollisuus antaa palautetta ja/tai esittää toiveita: