

# **The potential of Finnish wellness holidays for Russian tourists**

Case VuokattiSport

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Bachelor's Thesis

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<p><b>Abstract</b></p> <p>Today's hectic lifestyle has resulted in the increasing demand of wellness holidays. This research examines the potential of Finnish wellness holidays for Russian tourists. Commissioned by Finnish sports institute VuokattiSport, the objective of the study was to clarify what kind of wellness holidays the case company should provide to attract tourists from St. Petersburg.</p> <p>The study follows the principles of a quantitative research. The theoretical framework consists of wellness as a tourism segment and Russian tourism in Finland. In addition, a SWOT analysis of the case company was prepared. The empirical part of the research was implemented as a survey questionnaire in cooperation with a Russian sports center Nova Arena. The survey was available for the customers of Nova Arena for one week, and within that period answers were gathered from 102 customers.</p> <p>The findings of the survey indicated that there is a high demand for Finnish wellness holidays among Russian tourists. VuokattiSport received useful information about what kind of wellness holiday packages would attract Russian tourists, and what are the main activities VuokattiSport should focus on. Through the findings, VuokattiSport can improve its tourism operations significantly and offer more attractive products to Russian wellness tourists.</p>			
<p><b>Keywords</b></p> <p>wellness, wellness tourism, Russian tourists, VuokattiSport, St. Petersburg</p>			

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- Appendix 1 VuokattiSport brochure in English
- Appendix 2 VuokattiSport brochure in Russian

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Wellness tourism is a growing business field all over the world. Due to the hectic and stressful lifestyle, people have become more interested in achieving comprehensive physical and mental well-being and relaxation. This can be seen as a growing demand for versatile wellness products and services.

This study examines the demand for Finnish wellness tourism in St. Petersburg, Russia. Assigned by Finnish sports institute VuokattiSport, the practical goal of our research is to define what kind of wellness holidays the case company should provide to attract tourists from St. Petersburg to VuokattiSport. As a whole, this report examines the potential of Finnish wellness holidays for Russian tourists, with the perspective of VuokattiSport.

The case company VuokattiSport is a versatile sports center located in Eastern Finland. The core operations at VuokattiSport are categorized as coaching, education and tourism. The institute provides all-year-round training facilities for professional athletes as well as leisure travelers. VuokattiSport offers a variety of indoor and outdoor activities, physical testing services as well as wellness services.

The topic of this research originates from Veikko Halonen, the CEO of VuokattiSport. In 2017, VuokattiSport initiated a major reformation project with the aim of brightening its brand, improving its visual appearance and renovating its premises. With the reformation, the company aims to renew its tourism operations and attract new customers not only from Finland but abroad as well. As Russian tourism is significant for the tourism industry in Finland, the objective is to clarify to the commissioning company the needs of Russian wellness tourists. Along with the reformation, the challenging economic and political situation in Russia makes this research relevant and topical.

From the authors' point of view, the topic is ideal for its significance to working life and the aspect of international business. Having studied three years of international business, the goal is to conduct a research with applicable results that would benefit the case company in its international operations. Taking into account that the authors' personal interests are in sports and wellness industry, working on this topic feels natural and fascinating. The topic is also interesting as one of the authors is originally from Vuokatti, which is the location of the commissioning company.

The nature of this research is quantitative. The study is implemented as a survey questionnaire in cooperation with Nova Arena, a sports center located in St. Petersburg. The aim of the cooperation is to examine the overall interest of Nova Arena customers towards the wellness holidays at VuokattiSport. Typical for a quantitative research, the purpose is to generalize the results to a wider population as well. The questionnaire pursues to find answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a demand for Finnish wellness holidays in St. Petersburg area?
2. What kind of wellness holidays are attractive for Russians?

The structure of this report consists of two parts. The first part reviews the theoretical part of the subject, establishing a solid platform for the research. The studied theory focuses on wellness as a tourism segment and Russian tourism in Finland. To bring added value to the research, a SWOT analysis of the case company VuokattiSport is conducted. The theoretical framework is mainly based on sources such as Statistics Finland, Visit Finland, World Tourism Organization UNWTO and the CEO of the case company VuokattiSport.

The second part of the report introduces the quantitative research. At first, the aims and implementation of the research is covered, followed by a review of the results and conclusions. To finalize the report, the outcome and influences of our work are discussed. The appendices include the Russian and English versions of the conducted questionnaire.

## 2 WELLNESS TOURISM

### 2.1 Definition of wellness

Wellness and well-being are extensive concepts, and they often mean different things to different people. The term wellness was first developed by an American researcher Halbert Dunn in 1959. Dunn defined the term as multi-dimensional lifestyle that is aiming for physical and mental well-being. The term wellness consists of two words: well-being and fitness. Wellness is based on The World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". (World Health Organization 2017; Global Wellness Institute 2016)

Wellness is a stable state of mind, body and soul. It highlights the individual responsibility of personal well-being, and it can differ widely between people. Wellness also includes a person's relationship with others, with the environment and with one's self. In wellness, a person is the producer and accessor of one's personal welfare. (Suontausta & Tyni 2005, 45-46; Smith & Puczkó 2009, 54)

Wellness does not only mean lacking of illness, but it concentrates in the continuous and active promotion of wellbeing and health. Wellness highlights healthy and responsible life choices and encourages individuals to promote their wellbeing. An individual that is focused in wellness is usually striving for a healthier lifestyle as well as maintaining comprehensive wellbeing. Wellness emphasizes an individual's personal responsibility of producing one's own well-being. (Global Spa and Wellness Summit 2014, 4)



The term wellness can be reviewed more widely through a model made by Müller & Lanz-Kaufmann (2001). The model is called the widened wellness model, and it explains more widely the concept of wellness (Figure 1). The center of the figure states the self-responsibility of a person. The middle circle contains the divisions of mind, body and soul. It represents mental activity, physical fitness, beauty care, nutrition and rest. The outmost circle represents the external factors like social contacts. These external factors play a major role in a person's overall well-being.

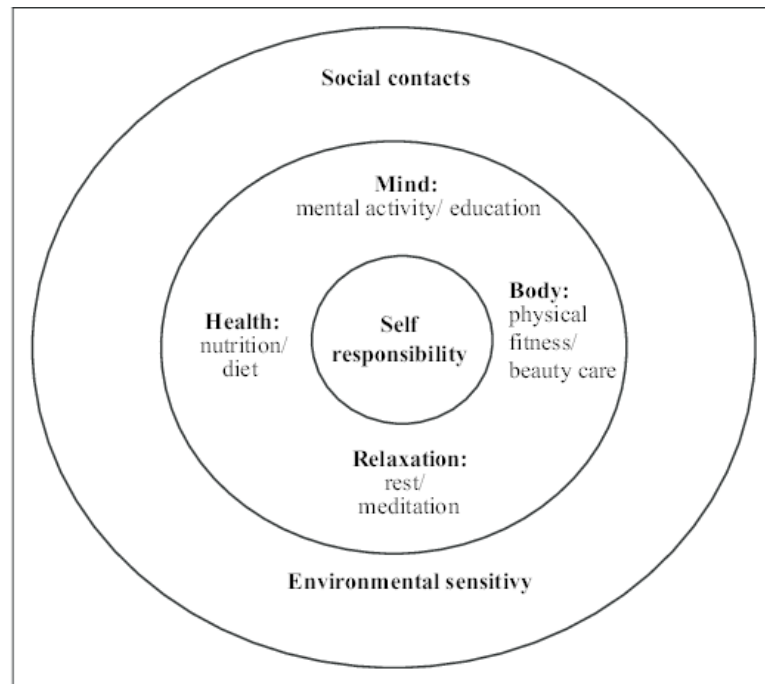


FIGURE 1. Extended wellness model (Müller & Lanz-Kauffman 2001, 6)

Although the global economic crisis has negatively affected in the growth of economy, the demand for wellness services has grown rapidly. Stressful lifestyle, aging population and progressive health issues have raised people's attention of their own health. Tourism service providers have noticed this fact and developed a wide range of different wellness services. (Koncul 2012, 526)

According to the research made by Global Wellness Institute (2017, 3-4), the global wellness economy was worth 3,7 trillion US dollars in 2015. At the moment the wellness economy represents more than 5% of the global economic output, and is almost half the size of all global health expenditures.

## 2.2 Wellness as a tourism segment

Wellness tourism is a relatively new concept, and there are multiple ways of defining it. The most common concepts used with wellness tourism are health tourism and wellbeing. All of these terms are close synonyms with each other, but they do not comprise exactly the same issues. (Tuohino 2012, 5)

The terms health-care tourism and wellness tourism are often mixed with each other, since they are both connected to nature, sports and culture tourism. Health tourism differs from wellness tourism, since the main purpose of the holiday is to take care of one's health by healing a sickness or a disease. Healing and maintaining physical and mental health are often united with health tourism, whereas wellness tourism is seen as a wider totality. (Matkailun edistämiskeskus MEK 2005, 56)

As seen in Figure 2, health tourism can be divided into two sections and their subspecies; medical and health-care tourism and well-being and wellness tourism. Medical and health-care tourism emphasizes taking care of one's health, especially by healing a sickness or a disease. Finland has special treatment and rehabilitation centers that are focused on medical and health-care tourism. These centers are usually maintained by the public sector. (Verhelä & Lackman 2003, 141)

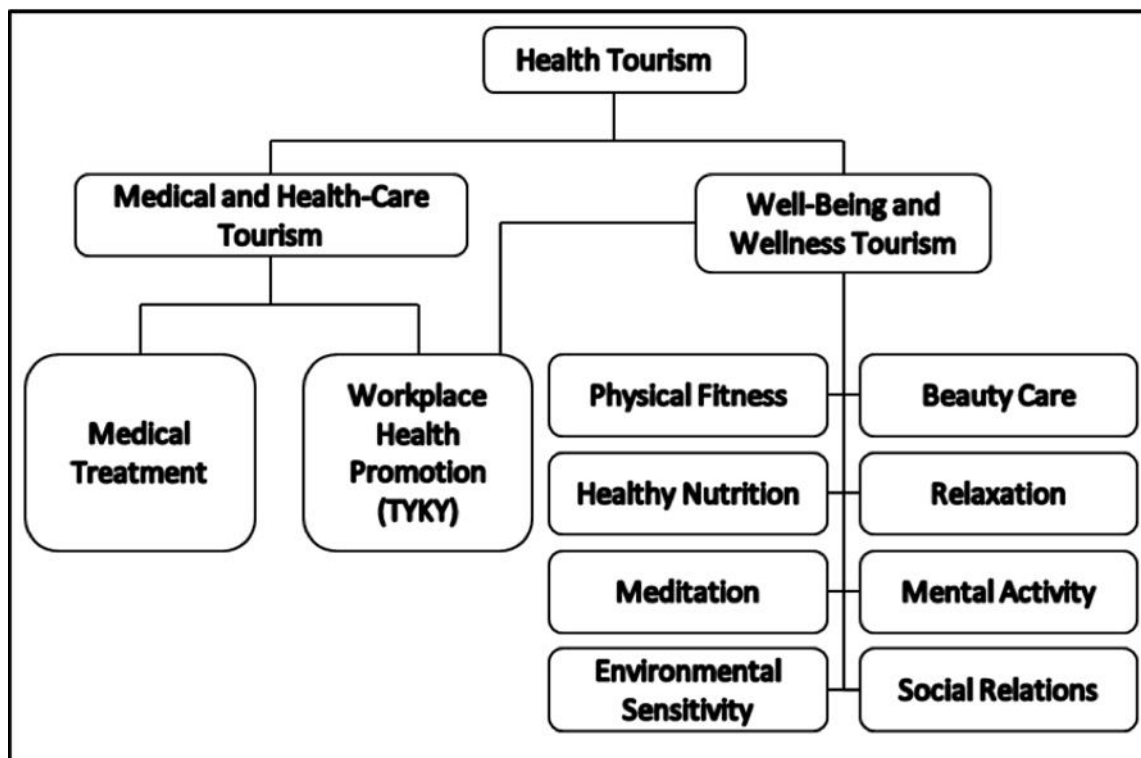


FIGURE 2. Categorization of wellness tourism (Suontausta & Tyni 2005, 69)

Another subspecies of the medical and health-care tourism sector is workplace health promotion (TYKY). The focus of the workplace health promotion is to maintain the employees' physical and mental health by different kinds of projects and programs. (Verhelä & Lackman 2003, 142)

Well-being and wellness tourism includes more comprehensive activities, such as meditation, mental activity, beauty care, environmental sensitivity and physical fitness (Figure 2). According to Global Wellness Institute (2017, 7), wellness tourism is travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal well-being. Wellness tourism is often assigned with spa facilities and hotels specialized in wellness.

It can also include different kinds of sports, therapies, massages, body and facial treatments, wellness courses and activities in the nature. Wellness tourism produces comprehensive, both physical and mental welfare. (Matkailun edistämiskeskus MEK 2005, 56)

Matkailun osaamiskeskus has defined wellness tourism as follows: "Wellness tourism is the type of tourism that produces the traveler good feeling even after the holiday ends. Wellness tourism does not heal diseases or repair one's condition, but it promotes personal well-being and gives vitality for life. Wellness tourism produces individual and comprehensive good feeling for the traveler, and promotes both physical and mental activity." (VisitFinland 2014a, 5)

Wellness tourism has grown rapidly during the past few years. People are more interested in their physical and mental well-being, and it can be seen in the changing consumer behaviour. Travelers want to avoid the encumbrance resulting from traveling, and they are actively seeking for wellness components in their holidays. For example unhealthy meal choices and jet lag want to be avoided and replaced with physical activities and healthy meals. (Global Spa and Wellness summit 2014, 5)

### **Visit Finland Growth Programmes**

At the moment Visit Finland has three different growth programmes: Finnish Archipelago, Stopover Finland and the wellness-theme FinRelax. (Visit Finland 2017a)

The growth program Finnish Archipelago aims to increase the attractiveness, accessibility and awareness of the Finnish Archipelago, and assemble the product supply of the coastal area into an attractive form, in order to counterpart to the winter

product supply in Lapland. The Finnish Archipelago is especially a summer destination, and it comprises the entire coast of Finland from the eastern border to the Swedish border, including the Åland Islands. The product supply will include objectives such as activity, culture and wellbeing programs, such as tours of wooden towns, lighthouses, national parks and world heritage sites. (Visit Finland 2017a)

The other Visit Finland growth program, Stopover Finland, aims to developing Finland as a stopover destination. The main customer group is the people traveling from Asia to other parts of Europe via Helsinki Airport, and the aim is to build attractive packages from few hours transfer to several days of stay. Visit Finland is aiming to achieve a 45% increase in registered overnights from Asia by 2018. Stopover travelers are being offered a chance to experience Finnish highlights such as Midnight Sun, Northern Lights, the Finnish forests, lake and sauna, as well as the best parts of Finnish culture. (Visit Finland 2017a)

### **FinRelax**

The third of the Visit Finland's growth programmes is the wellness-focused FinRelax. The aim is to make Finland a leading country among the well-being travel destinations. The programme supports regional project planning and implementation in order to encourage and emphasize the regional development work. (Visit Finland 2017a)

The programme FinRelax is especially aimed at companies that have the potential product and service supply in order to attract international wellness travelers. The main focus is that the location is easily accessible and attractive, and it should preferably be a year-round destination that can be tailored to both European and Asian travelers. The main target countries for the FinRelax program are Russia, Germany and Japan. (Visit Finland 2017a)

According to Visit Finland, FinRelax wellness holiday consist of the following: Finnish sauna tradition, wellbeing cottage holiday, fresh water, pure nature including light activities, quietness, space, light and traditional Finnish food. (Visit Finland 2017a)

### 2.3 Wellness tourism in Finland

Nordic countries have raised their position among the travel destinations during the past few years. Due to hectic lifestyle and the tension in world economy, people are seeking for relaxation and quietness in their lives. Since the traditional travel destinations are more and more crowded all the time, travelers are seeking for alternative options for their holidays from quieter destinations. Finland has the potential of separating itself from the wellness product supply among other countries. (Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011, 4; Global Spa and Wellness 2014, 10)

The most internationally important objectives in Finnish tourism are versatile activities in the wilderness, sauna, observation of the nature, quietness and relaxing. As a counterbalance, tourists are also interested in the cultural activities and wide-ranging events. While retrieving high-quality, comprehensive experiences that generates both physical and mental pleasure, it is important to focus especially in the main objectives that attract tourists from everywhere in the world. Travelers are seeking for a break from everyday life while they come to Finland for a cottage holiday in the nature or for an urban city holiday. (Visit Finland 2014a, 4)

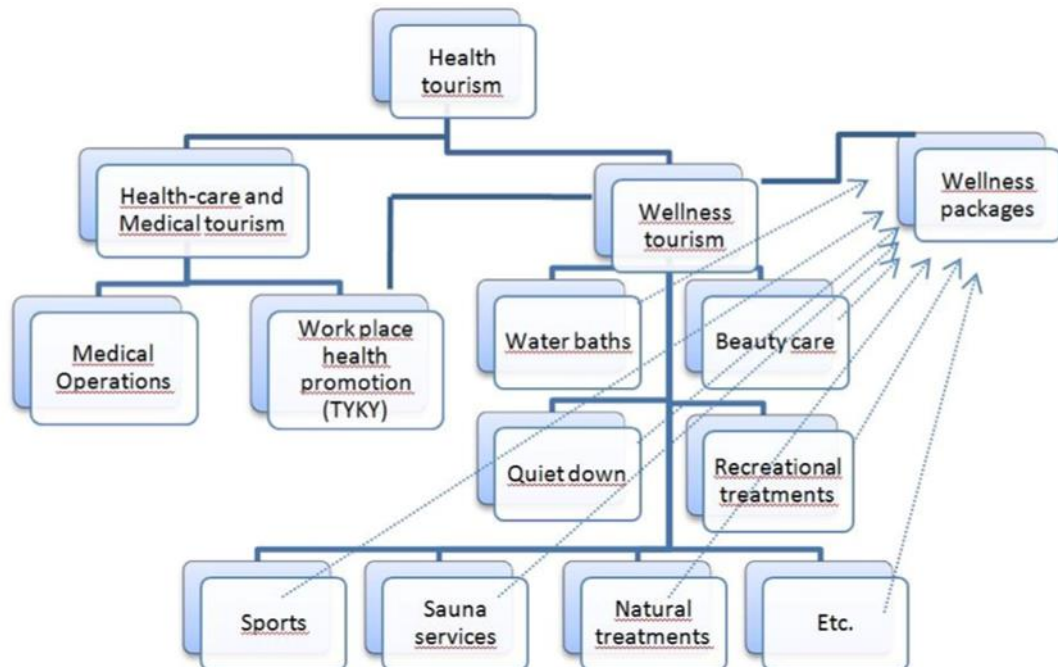


FIGURE 3. Recommendable terms of the Finnish wellness components (Matkailun edistämiskeskus MEK 2005, 55)

According to the wellness tourism strategy made by Visit Finland (2014a, 3), international tourists are especially interested in Northern and Lake-Finland as well as

the Finnish archipelago. Wellness tourism is, however, still a new concept for Finnish travel agencies and service providers, and often their wellness products vanish among other tourism products and services. This makes it hard for international tourists that are seeking for exclusively wellness products and services.

One trend of today's tourism is to imitate the manners and habits of the local people. Finnish people love being outdoors in the nature, picking berries and mushrooms, doing comprehensive sports and relaxing in sauna. While the objective is to attract international wellness travelers to Finland, these are the main elements that could be used to build attractive wellness holidays that meet the international demand. (Jänkälä 2014)

#### 2.4 Wellness tourism at VuokattiSport

Visit Finland has defined the growth programme FinRelax for companies that have the preparedness to develop their tourism product for international travelers. According to Visit Finland, the products and services should be easily accessible and have the possibility of being tailored to different needs. (Visit Finland 2017a)

VuokattiSport offers all the factors for a tailored wellness holiday. VuokattiSport is surrounded by pure nature, which offers the travelers a wide range of opportunities for doing activities and relaxing in the nature. Nature is seen as a place for refreshment and empowerment, and it is the most powerful element of Finnish wellness tourism supply.

Being surrounded by nature, VuokattiSport has also the strength for other related objectives in the wellness theme: quietness, space and light. As the word of today's wellness tourism is mindfulness (Visit Finland 2017a), the nature and its quietness supports breaking away from the everyday rush and relieves stress, also furthering a better sleep at night.

VuokattiSport does not only offer the possibility for activities in the nature, but it has also other elements for a Finnish wellness holiday. One of the most attractive Finnish elements is sauna, and the experience of Finnish sauna tradition. Sauna is often at its best when it is attained with cottage holiday and with the opportunity for swimming in fresh lake water, and all of these three parts can be compounded at VuokattiSport.

VuokattiSport can differ itself from the other wellness holiday suppliers by exploiting its great nature facilities. Vuokatti is easily accessible from all over the world, which makes it easy for wellness travelers to reach. Among the wide nature facilities, VuokattiSport offers opportunities to all kinds of sports attained to wellness tourism, as well as traditional Finnish food and possibilities for massages and other treatments related to wellness.

### 3 RUSSIAN TOURISM IN FINLAND

#### 3.1 Statistics

According to a study by Tutkimus- ja analysointikeskus TAK Oy (2014), Finland has been the most popular traveling destination for Russians during the past years. The amount of Russian travels to Finland has steadily grown ever since the beginning of 1990 (Figure 4).



FIGURE 4. Russian travels to Finland, 1992–2013 (Tutkimus- ja analysointikeskus TAK Oy 2014)

As seen from the Figure 4, the only times when Russian travels to Finland did not increase compared to the previous year were in 1999 and 2009. In those years, the amount of travels remained the same or decreased slightly. The exceptions were due to the recession periods in Russia at those times. (Tutkimus- ja analysointikeskus TAK Oy 2014)

The figure indicates how many Russians travelled to Finland via the land borders from 1992 to 2013. However, the numbers presented in the figure exclude travels via sea or air. Including all the travels via each border crossing points, the numbers would be in fact higher. For example, in 2013 Finland experienced its peak of Russian tourism, as altogether 5,2 million travels were made to Finland. (Tutkimus- ja analysointikeskus TAK Oy 2014)



Regarding the recent few years from 2014 to 2016, Russian tourism in Finland has been unstable (Figure 5). At the end of the year 2014, Russia faced major issues in its economic and political environment, main negative factor being the collapse in the value of ruble. The challenging situation in Russia immediately influenced Russian outbound travels to Finland, as the record-breaking 5,2 million Russians in 2013 was followed by 3,8 million Russians in 2014. Furthermore, Russian travels to Finland in 2015 amounted only to 2,7 million travels. (Visit Finland 2017b; 2016a; 2015a)



FIGURE 5. Russian travels to Finland, 2013-2016 (Visit Finland 2017b; 2016a; 2015a)

However, the challenging situation in Russia has slowly begun to settle in the second half of 2016. In the autumn, Russian travels to Finland suggested considerable growth for the first time in past two to three years. Moreover, the traditional Russian festive season in December, 2016 and January, 2017, signified a successful period for Russian tourism in Finland. Statistically, the festive season resulted as increase in the amount of overnights spent in Finland and arrivals to Finland. (Visit Finland 2017c)

### 3.2 Finland as a destination

The Nordic countries, especially Finland and Sweden are the most visited destinations for tourists from St. Petersburg. The popularity can be explained by nearby location of the countries and the fact that most people from St. Petersburg have a multiple-entry visa for Finland which enables the easy access to the country. (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission 2009, 95)

According to a recent study (Visit Finland 2016b), Finland holds the leading position as a destination for Russian tourists compared to its main competitors; Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Estonia. In the eyes of Russian tourists, Finland was ranked number one in all of the three categories focused on the test: Familiarity, Consideration and Likelihood to Visit. Accordingly, Russians considered Finland as the best-known and the most attractive destination compared to its top competitors.

The study indicated that Russians are generally familiar with the assets of Finnish nature and holiday experiences. When asked which three words come to mind when thinking of Finland, Russians answered mostly nature-related matters, such as snow, lake, nature and winter (Figure 6). The study highlights that Finland stands out as a family-friendly destination for active holidays and winter sports. (Visit Finland 2016b)



FIGURE 6. Finnish associations according to Russians (Visit Finland 2016b)

The current advantages of Finland as a holiday destination for Russians are location with relatively easy access, safety and comfortable transportation. What are seen as the challenges of Finland, is that it is a destination for outdoor activities only and there is a lack of activities in general. When it comes to food and culture, Finland is considered to have a narrow selection. (Visit Finland 2016c)

To gain better understanding of how Russians view Finland, Kairos Future (2014), compiled an analysis based on Finnish references found from Russian web pages and social media. According to the findings, Finland is:

- Nature-lovers' paradise
- A place to recharge one's batteries
- A country where everything tastes better
- A gateway to Europe
- Where the Scandinavian and Baltic routes intersect
- A place with the magic of the North
- The best country to give birth in
- A country offering cultural immersion through sauna
- A country with different nightlife
- A decent winter sports destination.

On the contrary, the analysis revealed that common complaints about Finland considered accommodation, food and service. Examples of complaints were negative attitudes against Russians, lack of activities in the cities, lack of Russian service and unfavorable exchange rates. (Kairos Future 2014)

### **Holiday activities**

The holiday activities performed in Finland depend on the gender of the tourist. Men are usually interested in outdoor activities combined with cottage accommodation, whereas women often prefer shopping tours. (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission 2009, 95)

In the winter, Russian tourists seek for holidays with outdoor activities such as skiing, snowmobiling and ice fishing. In fact, the image of Finland for the tourists in St. Petersburg and Moscow is heavily centralized on snow holidays and skiing in particular. For families with children, one of the most important holiday experiences is playing in the snow. Snowball fights, building a snowman and sliding in the snow are all rare activities for the Russian families. Russians appreciate the Finnish nature with its white snow, purity, silence, peace, darkness and the Northern lights. (Malankin 2012, 40-41)

The most important activities for Russians in a winter holiday in Finland are downhill skiing, cross-country skiing, visiting the home of Santa Claus, sleigh rides pulled by Huskies or reindeer, snowmobile safaris, visiting reindeer farm and authentic Finnish sauna. (Malankin 2012, 41)

For the Russians spending their summer holidays in Finland, it is important to have beach and water near. Beach holidays are often combined with cultural events as well. Russian tourists care for cottage holidays, where they can enjoy nature and activities such as swimming, fishing and berry picking. They are also interested in new experiences – white water rafting, boating, water-skiing are all exciting activities to try out. Russians often think that everything should be tried out and especially when you are on holiday. (Malankin 2012, 38)

### Reasons for traveling to Finland

There are several reasons for Russians to travel to Finland. Most importantly, Finland is considered to be near and easy to access and it has a beautiful nature and great shopping possibilities. As a holiday destination, Finland is popular because of its pure nature, safety and peace, and great location. As a shopping destination, Finland is attractive because of the quality of the products, broader selection and more favorable price levels compared to Russia. (Malankin 2012, 23)

As seen from Figure 7, the main reason for Russians to travel to Finland is shopping. In 2015, over half (53%) of the Russian outbound travels to Finland were shopping trips and a third (33%) were made for leisure. Other reasons for traveling, such as business or visiting friends or family accounted for 12% of the total amount of the trips. (Visit Finland 2016d)

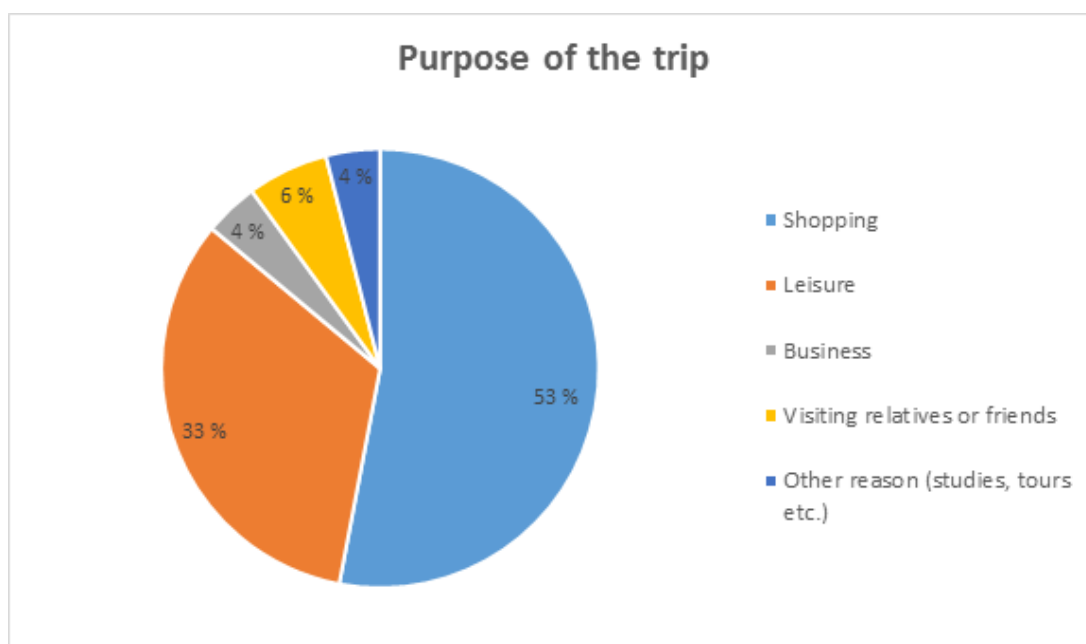


FIGURE 7. Purpose of the trip (Visit Finland 2016d)

### 3.3 Wellness holidays

One of the growing tourism segments for Russians is wellness tourism. According to Russian travel agencies, roughly 7% of the products available in Moscow are wellness holidays to Finland, and in St. Petersburg, the share is more than 10%. (Visit Finland 2014b)

A study (Vanchinova 2015), suggests that a typical Russian wellness holiday in Finland includes spa and different treatments, massages, sauna, guided physical activities and fishing. In addition, Malankin (2012, 26) proposes individual and medical treatments, original spa holidays and spiritual holidays as potential wellness products for Russians.

The target group consists of middle-aged, affluent men and women, as well as over 40-years-old, working women with the possibility to invest in their wellbeing and beauty. For men, the focus is on different treatments and better physical condition. When choosing the product, it is important that the affect is seen and felt. Women pursue for indulgence, relaxation and preventing the ailments. (Malankin 2012, 35)

A study (Hakkarainen, Järviluoma & Muje 2014), suggests that the upcoming trends in developing Finnish tourism could be focusing on wellness activities such as sauna, relaxation, exercising, fishing and mental well-being. Secondly, Visit Finland (2016b) recommends to focus especially on relaxing cottage retreats and highlighting the Finnish sauna culture as well as strengthening Finland's profile as a summer destination.

### 3.4 Current challenges and opportunities

Russian outbound travel market is highly influenced by economic and political issues. The travel market has faced difficulties since the devaluation of Russian ruble against euro has decreased the Russian purchasing power significantly. In 2015, the country's outbound travels dropped by almost a third (31,3%) compared to the previous year. In the amount of travels, the decrease translates to 12 million, which is the highest drop in 18 years. (Visit Finland 2016c)

In 2009, World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission reported that the leading holiday destinations for Russians were Turkey and Egypt. The popularity was based on sun and beach attractions, affordability and easy access. However, due to the

tightened political situation in Russia and the two aircraft accidents in Turkey and Egypt in 2015, tourism to those countries had a notable decrease. (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission 2009, 36; Visit Finland 2016c)

Moreover, Russian government is encouraging for domestic tourism by imposing travel restrictions to certain profession groups. In 2015, Russian employees of national security, defense and law enforcement agencies were recommended not to travel to Western countries. Thus, roughly four million Russians were prohibited to travel because of their profession. The influence is multiple times higher since families rarely travel if one of the family members is not allowed to travel. With approximately 18 million potential international travelers in Russia, the ban concerns relatively large amount of Russian tourism. (Visit Finland 2016b; 2015b)

Since the beginning of 2017, a new federal law regulating the workings of the travel industries in Russia has been effected. The purpose of the law is to protect Russian tourists legally and strengthen the liability of tour operators. In practice, the tour operators are responsible for compensating damages to tourists who lost their money due to the tourist companies exiting the market. The law challenges the financial situation of tour operators, leading many of them into bankruptcy. (Visit Finland 2016e)

According to an estimation (Suomen Pankki 2016), Russian economy is gradually starting to revive in 2017. The price of oil barrel in 2016 was less than 45 dollars and the estimated price in 2018 is 55 dollars. Based on the increase in the price of oil and the slowdown in inflation, the Gross Domestic Product of Russia is slowly recovering in 2017.

The impacts of the strengthened ruble were visible already in autumn 2016, when Russian tourism to Finland gained growth. Kymenlaakso Chamber of Commerce (2016) reported that travels to Finland between September and October increased 4% compared to the previous year. Gathering from the Russians traveling intentions, the results stated that tourism to Finland between December and January could increase 27% compared to 2015.

Russian tourism in Finland has increased vastly during the last decade. Between 2009 and 2013, Finland experienced its strongest growth in the amount of tourists and number of overnights spent in the country. The growth was interrupted in 2014 by notable changes in the political and economic situation in Russia as the Ukrainian crisis

and the collapse in the price of oil weakened the Russian ruble significantly. (Visit Finland & Tilastokeskus 2017; Pasanen & Pesonen 2016, 5)

One of the factors influencing Russian tourism in Finland is visa requirements. Tutkimus- ja analysointikeskus TAK Oy (2013) investigated what would be the impact on Russian tourism in Finland if the visa requirements would be removed. The study was conducted right before the Ukrainian crisis and the collapse of Russian economy, making it difficult to review the results in such radically changed environment. Nonetheless, the visa-free travel could enhance Russian tourism in Finland, now that the tourism industry in Russia is broadly weakened. (Pasanen & Pesonen 2016, 29)

The study (Tutkimus- ja analysointikeskus TAK Oy 2013) discovered that removing the visa requirements would improve Russian tourism in Finland. In 2012, there were four million travels to Finland and with visa-free travel the number would increase to approximately 7,1 million travels a year. The results indicated that travels especially from Moscow would rise. Financially, the visa-free travels would increase tourism revenues of Finland by at least two billion euros. In 2012, the expenditures of Russian tourists were roughly one billion euros and with visa-free travel it would reach three billion euros at the fewest.

## 4 VUOKATTISPORT

### 4.1 Organization

VuokattiSport is a versatile sports institute located in Vuokatti, Eastern Finland. Established in 1945, the core operations at VuokattiSport are categorized as coaching, education and tourism (Figure 8). Since 2016, the CEO of VuokattiSport has been Veikko Halonen. (Halonen 2016)

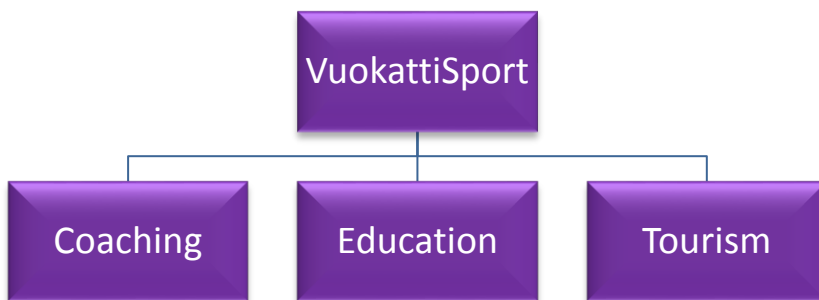


FIGURE 8. The core operations at VuokattiSport

The ownership of VuokattiSport is divided in two halves. Half of the institute is owned by the Finnish Ski Association and the other half by different sports organizations in the Kainuu region in Finland.

At the moment VuokattiSport employs approximately one hundred people, from which 80 are full-time workers, and 20 part-time. Most of the part-time employees are coaches with high profession.

#### **Coaching**

The most important operation at VuokattiSport is coaching professional athletes. The institute is focused on winter sports, especially on Nordic ski sports. VuokattiSport offers comprehensive training conditions for sports such as cross-country skiing, ski jumping, Nordic combined, biathlon and snowboarding.

At current, there are six national training centers for professional athletes in Finland, known as Olympic Training Centers. Representing one of them, VuokattiSport guarantees high-quality training among the world's best athletes and coaches in top



conditions. Together with the Finnish Olympic Committee, VuokattiSport aims to develop Finnish coaching industry and its framework.

VuokattiSport is part of Vuokatti-Ruka Sports Academy, which is a local network gathering all the educational institutes and sports organizations within the area. VuokattiSport plays a vital role in the academy, as it provides coaching and comprehensive training facilities for the students of the academy.

## **Education**

One of the core operations at VuokattiSport is offering vocational education and further education. In the application period of 2017, degrees were available in physical education, coaching and massage therapy. Since 2004, the premises of VuokattiSport have been used by Sports Technology Unit of Jyväskylä University in its Master and Doctoral programmes. VuokattiSport also offers ski instructor courses in cooperation with the Finnish Association of Ski Instructors.

## **Tourism**

In addition to coaching and education, VuokattiSport is a popular holiday destination for sports and leisure tourists. The great variety of outdoor and indoor activities attracts tourists not only from Finland but also abroad, as about 13% of the customers at VuokattiSport are foreigners. (Halonen 2017)

There are two peak seasons at VuokattiSport. The first peak is when Vuokatti starts its snow season on October 10, and the peak continues through Christmas time. The second peak is on winter holidays in March. (Halonen 2017)

At current, VuokattiSport is renewing its tourism operations. Previously, the center was focusing more on business to business operations, as majority of the products were group holidays for different organizations and workplaces. Today, VuokattiSport concentrates on individual customers by offering customized holidays.

### **4.2 Activities and services**

VuokattiSport aims to offer versatile holidays, where customers can easily try different sports with the help of instructor, if wanted. The activities offered are based on the

ongoing season. For example, in the winter you can go downhill skiing, cross-country skiing or snowshoeing and in the summer you can go paddling, pole walking or cycling. During the Finnish holiday seasons, guided activities are available for children and adults every day. The center wants to encourage children and youngsters to exercise by organizing sports camps and activities for families with children as well. (Halonen 2017)

VuokattiSport has long traditions in skiing, but today the center offers numerous possibilities for other activities as well. The key operations can be categorized as followed: outdoor activities, indoor activities, testing services and wellness services.

#### 4.2.1 Outdoor activities

The activities at VuokattiSport are strongly focused on winter sports, such as cross-country skiing, ski jumping, Nordic combined, biathlon and snowboarding. The center offers skiing on snow every day throughout the year, as the world's first indoor ski track was built in Vuokatti. In addition, Vuokatti is one of the first places in the world offering snow-covered outdoor ski tracks as early as in October. In total, Vuokatti has 150 kilometers of ski tracks for athletes to enjoy.

All in all, Vuokatti has a great selection of various outdoor activities. The customers can try activities such as:

- ski tracks
- biathlon
- football
- ice hockey
- cross-country running
- snowboarding
- slopes
- ski jumps
- roller ski
- disc-golf
- outdoor tennis
- rowing
- canoeing
- wakeboarding
- hiking,
- and orienteering.

#### 4.2.2 Indoor activities

For indoor activities, VuokattiSport has three main facilities: sports hall *Pallohalli*, sports hall *Vuokattihalli* and a swimming hall. *Pallohalli* enables the playing of ball games while *Vuokattihalli* is a large facility used not only for sports but also events such as conferences and exhibitions. Customers at VuokattiSport can try indoor activities such as:

- ski tunnel
- gym
- basketball
- volleyball
- floorball
- indoor cycling
- badminton
- squash
- gymnastics hall
- tennis
- swimming hall,  
and athletics.

#### 4.2.3 Testing services

One of the key operations at VuokattiSport is testing services. The testing center *Kuntokatti* offers high-quality testing for all levels of athletes interested in measuring their physical condition. The services are suitable for beginners, basic level athletes as well as competing athletes. Made in cooperation with the University of Jyväskylä, the testing services help customers to define their level of physical condition and how it can be improved. The test results are used as a basis of planning the training program and monitoring the physical progress in the long run. All in all, the tests available include aerobic fitness testing, muscular strength testing, body composition measurements and FirstBeat wellness analysis.

For beginners and basic level athletes, VuokattiSport offers tests such as cycle ergometer test, the UKK Walk Test and Health-Related Fitness Test and many other tests measuring aerobic fitness and muscular strength.

On a professional level, physical testing plays a major role in the progress of an athlete's performance. For determining the factors that need improvement, VuokattiSport offers various tests measuring the maximal oxygen uptake, lactate control and muscular strength. The test results provide vital information about the athlete's performance for the coach and the athlete as well, helping with the alignments of the training. VuokattiSport also offers sport-specific testing packages designed for athletes competing in a particular sport.

#### 4.2.4 Wellness services

Among outdoor and indoor activities, VuokattiSport offers also additional wellness services. Wellness services is a wide concept, since it can include any activities or services that a person wants on their wellness holiday.

The most important wellness tourism element in VuokattiSport is the pure nature. VuokattiSport is surrounded by nature, and different kind of activities in the forest can already be counted as a wellness service.

VuokattiSport has a variety of different saunas that offer the tourists a possibility for a traditional Finnish sauna experience. The sports institute has an opportunity for swimming in a fresh lake water, or in winter time from the hole in the ice. The tourists have also a possibility for dining traditional Finnish food or just enjoying the surrounding quietness and light. VuokattiSport has a massage center where the customers can get the massages from students at a low price.

#### 4.3 SWOT Analysis

This chapter contains a wider contrast of VuokattiSport through a SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis includes the internal strengths and weaknesses as well as the external opportunities and threats of the commissioning company. The following figure, acts as a summary of the analysis.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long tradition and experience in winter sports</li> <li>• Stable financial position</li> <li>• Extensive facilities</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felted brand</li> <li>• Degenerated organization</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing consumer behaviour</li> <li>• Wellness as a growing brand</li> <li>• New branding of VuokattiSport</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational change does not meet the demand of consumer behaviour</li> <li>• Challenge of new branding</li> <li>• Climate change</li> </ul>

FIGURE 9. SWOT analysis of VuokattiSport

#### 4.3.1 Strengths

The main strength of VuokattiSport is its 70 years of tradition and history. VuokattiSport is notorious of its development work and coaching in winter sports, especially in cross-country skiing. VuokattiSport has an overpowering know-how and proofs of coaching nordic skiing, as it is an official Olympic training center.

Another strength of VuokattiSport is its stable financial position. VuokattiSport has a solid income all-year-round, which guarantees the chance for new investments.

VuokattiSport has extensive facilities for all kinds of sports, both outdoors and indoors. The outdoor and nature activities bring a great value especially for the wellness travelers. Since VuokattiSport is an all-year-round destination, its wide-ranging outdoor activities change depending on the season. VuokattiSport offers facilities for all kinds of travelers.

#### 4.3.2 Weaknesses

VuokattiSport is often seen as a professional sports training center for top athletes only, and it does not yet reach tourists seeking for wellness holidays. VuokattiSport has a lot of potential for being on top among the wellness locations, but the branding needs to encounter the right customer base.

The target market of VuokattiSport has previously been groups, especially families and businesses. Nowadays group holidays are losing their popularity, and tailored holidays are raising among people. People that are interested in tailored wellness holidays, are not yet aware of VuokattiSport's wide range of services.

VuokattiSport has had the same employees for decades, and they are used to operate in certain ways. Now that the old habits are starting to be outdated, they need to be renewed to answer the changing consumer behaviour. It is difficult to change the way of operating in a big organization, and the renewing takes time and strong leadership.

### 4.3.3 Opportunities

VuokattiSport is currently doing a major branding reform to the entire sports vacation concept. The main objective is to renovate the facilities of the sports institute as well as brighten the visual appearance of it.

While the consumer behaviour is changing, the new branding reformation is intended to respond to the shifting demand. People are looking for wider opportunities for their wellness holidays, and VuokattiSport has perfect facilities to correspond for that demand.

Wellness holidays are becoming more popular among people. Due to hectic lifestyle, people are not only seeking for full relaxation in their holidays, but also activities to keep their minds fresh and active. VuokattiSport is offering perfect facilities for wellness travelers, since their wide range of sports facilities offers something for everybody.

### 4.3.4 Threats

VuokattiSport is doing major organizational changes at the moment, intending to answer to the changing consumer behaviour. Since the branding is changing from the top-athletic training center to a wellness-oriented holiday location, there is a risk that the product supply fails to meet the changing demand. Wellness tourism is also a relatively new field, and there is not yet a lot of evidence of its profitability.

The main focus of VuokattiSport is in skiing. Due to climate change, winters are getting shorter and warmer, which causes shorter season for the skiers as well. Since the amount of skiers and other winter athletes may decrease, it can also mean a negative financial outcome for VuokattiSport. The sports institute needs to be able to develop new products to compensate the lack of winter conditions.

## 4.4 Cooperation with Nova Arena

The research aims to find out what kind of wellness holidays the commissioning company, VuokattiSport should provide to attract tourists from St. Petersburg. In order to gather relevant information about the demand for Finnish wellness tourism in St. Petersburg, VuokattiSport approached a Russian sports center with similar operations

and target market. Benefitting from the contacts of the company's CEO Veikko Halonen, VuokattiSport managed to gain cooperation with Nova Arena, a sports center operating in St. Petersburg.

Nova Arena is a modern sports complex located in St. Petersburg. Its massive premises include various sports fields, swimming hall, gym, beauty studio, restaurant, movie theatre and much more. The clientele of Nova Arena consists of affluent people willing to invest in their wellbeing and health. VuokattiSport was especially interested in cooperation with Nova Arena, as the clientele is possibly interested in sports and wellness services at VuokattiSport as well.

VuokattiSport commissioned us to compile a questionnaire (Appendix 1 & 2) for the customers of Nova Arena. To gain a better understanding of the operations and clientele of Nova Arena, we managed to arrange a personal meeting with the management of Nova Arena in its premises in St. Petersburg. As a link between us and Nova Arena, CEO Veikko Halonen connected us with two of his Russian business partners who were involved in the whole cooperation and acted as negotiators in the meeting with Nova Arena. All in all, the cooperation included four parties; VuokattiSport, us, the Russian business partners and Nova Arena.

The benefits of the cooperation between VuokattiSport and Nova Arena are mutual. VuokattiSport receives useful information about the needs of Russian tourists and can turn that information to account by launching more attractive wellness packages for Russian tourists. If the companies would continue their cooperation, Nova Arena would adopt these wellness packages into its products as well, and would gain added value by offering its customers with even more comprehensive services. In consequence, further cooperation would benefit both companies with potential new customers.

## 5 RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

### 5.1 Principles of conducting a research

A research can be conducted using either qualitative or quantitative methods. The chosen method is determined by the nature of the research. A simple way to classify these two methods is that if the research focuses on numbers and the connections between them, it is a quantitative research. Everything else can be classified as qualitative research. However, the method is primarily determined by the nature of the research problem. (Kananen 2010, 37)

In general, quantitative method is used when the research considers phenomenon that is already recognized and there is plenty of information available. Consequently, the existing theories provide answers to questions such as *what* and *how much*. (Kananen 2010, 20)

On the contrary, a qualitative method is used if the phenomenon is unfamiliar and there is little information available on the subject. A qualitative research focuses on defining the phenomenon and what are the factors behind it. (Kananen 2010, 20)

In addition to serving different purposes, the methods differ in practice. A qualitative research can be conducted as an interview for a few people only, as the objective is to define a phenomenon and the reasons for it. In contrast, a quantitative research utilizes the answers of tens or even hundreds of respondents. Accordingly, quantitative research enables the generalization of the results. (Kananen 2010, 38-39)

According to Vilkkä (2007), the features of a quantitative research are:

- structured information, which means that questions and answering options in the survey are standardized
- measurement and different indicators, which means that issues and factors are defined on a scale (gender, age, profession...)
- numerical processing of information
- objectivity of the research process and results
- and a large amount of respondents.



The process of conducting a quantitative research can be seen as a train that promptly proceeds step by step according to the rules of statistics. As in every research, the process begins with the research problem. The problem is followed by research questions that aim to collect the material in order to solve the problem. (Kananen 2010, 74)

In quantitative research, the data is collected with different surveys, interviews or systematic observations. Each of the methods have different ways for implementation: for example a survey can be conducted as an online questionnaire, postal survey or telephonic survey. Similarly, interviews and observations have different variations for implementation. (Vilkka 2007)

## 5.2 Success and reliability of the research

Whenever conducting a scientific research, the success and reliability of the research need to be evaluated. With proper evaluation, the results can be verified as trustworthy and high-quality. As seen from Figure 10, the credibility of a quantitative research consists of two concepts: reliability and validity. (Kananen 2010, 128)



FIGURE 10. Credibility of a quantitative research (Kananen 2010, 128)

**Reliability** refers to the repeatability of the results. Accordingly, if the research would be repeated, the results would be the same. The only way to ascertain the reliability of a research is to conduct the research again. In practice, repeating a quantitative research is tricky and inconvenient as the number of respondents could be hundreds or thousands. Still, in some cases repeating the research does not verify the reliability of the research. The studied case can lead in different results in different circumstances and timing. (Kananen 2010, 129)

Secondly, the credibility of a research can be evaluated through **validity**. The term can be divided into two separate concepts: external validity and internal validity. External validity refers to the generalization of the results: a research is externally valid if the results apply to a larger, similar group of people as well. Since quantitative research pursues for generalization, external validity is essential factor in it. (Kananen 2010, 129)

In addition, internal validity refers to how well the measures used in the research correspond to what is supposed to be measured. Internal validity can be seen as the accuracy of the used indicators. In practice, evaluating the internal validity in a quantitative research is almost impossible. However, the validity can be strengthened by documenting the research process precisely and preferably based on theory. (Kananen 2010, 131)

The reliability of this research is based on many arguments. The theoretical part of the research is completed with trustworthy and up-to-date sources. When selecting the source material, the basic principles of source criticism are followed. The information is utilized from Statistics Finland, Visit Finland, World Tourism Organization, CEO of the commissioning company VuokattiSport and from many other reliable sources.

The questionnaire is carefully planned in cooperation with other parties involved in the research. In order to ascertain the accuracy of the language, our business partners in Russia have translated the questionnaire from English to Russian (Appendix 1 & 2). The management of Nova Arena have provided suggestions for the proper language, in order to avoid misunderstandings. In addition, the nature of the questionnaire is structured, minimizing the risks of misinterpretation.

Before publishing the survey for the clients of Nova Arena, the commissioning company and the Russian business partners have reviewed the questionnaire several times. Thus, it is assured that there are no errors in the questionnaire.

Participating in the questionnaire is done privately in the premises of Nova Arena. Answering the survey is optional and customers are able to fill it in their spare time. Accordingly, there are no distractions or pressure while answering the questionnaire.

### 5.3 Background of the survey for Nova Arena customers

The main objective of the research is to define what kind of wellness holidays the case company VuokattiSport should provide to attract tourists from St. Petersburg. To gain relevant information, the survey is appointed to the customers of Nova Arena in St. Petersburg.

The aim is to clarify the overall interest towards wellness holidays at VuokattiSport instead of focusing on individuals' needs. Therefore, the method chosen for this research is quantitative. The research is carried out as a questionnaire survey.

The chosen method enables obtaining comprehensive information from large amount of customers in an efficient way. Since the issues included in the questionnaire are wide-ranging, it is vital to use an effective method. It is also important that the received answers are easily analyzed.

The questionnaire is available for the customers of Nova Arena for a one week period. The survey is in paper form and answering takes place in the premises of Nova Arena. The customers are able to take part in the survey according to their own schedule and answering is optional. All the received answers are considered in the results.

### 5.4 Planning and conducting the survey

The purpose of the survey is to clarify if the customers of Nova Arena are interested in wellness holidays in VuokattiSport. To obtain relevant information, the survey questions are compiled together with the commissioning company VuokattiSport and the collaborating company Nova Arena. Thus, it is assured that the questions are focused on relevant issues in terms of the study and the commissioning company. Both of the companies are actively involved in planning the questionnaire, since they want to know what kind of survey is conducted and how to make the best use of the obtained results.

The quantitative method used in this research is a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire is standardized, meaning that the questions asked are exactly the same and in the same order for each respondent. The respondent itself reads the questions and answers to them as well.

The questionnaire is compiled from multiple-choice questions with standardized answering options. The questionnaire also includes open questions, as the case company wants to gain as comprehensive information as possible. Due to the character of the survey and the fact that the target audience is not used to take part in long surveys, the questionnaire is designed to be as brief as possible, without compromising the quality.

## 6 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 Background information

The first four questions of our survey concerned gender, age, occupation and family status. The purpose of the questions was to clarify the backgrounds of the respondents and to enable the comparison of the similarities and deviation in the answers.

As seen from Figure 11, 60% were from females and 40% were from males. Approximately 68% of the respondents represented the age between 26 to 35 years or 36 to 45 years, and the remaining 32% represented the age of over 45 years. The largest respondent group were females aged between 26 to 35 years.

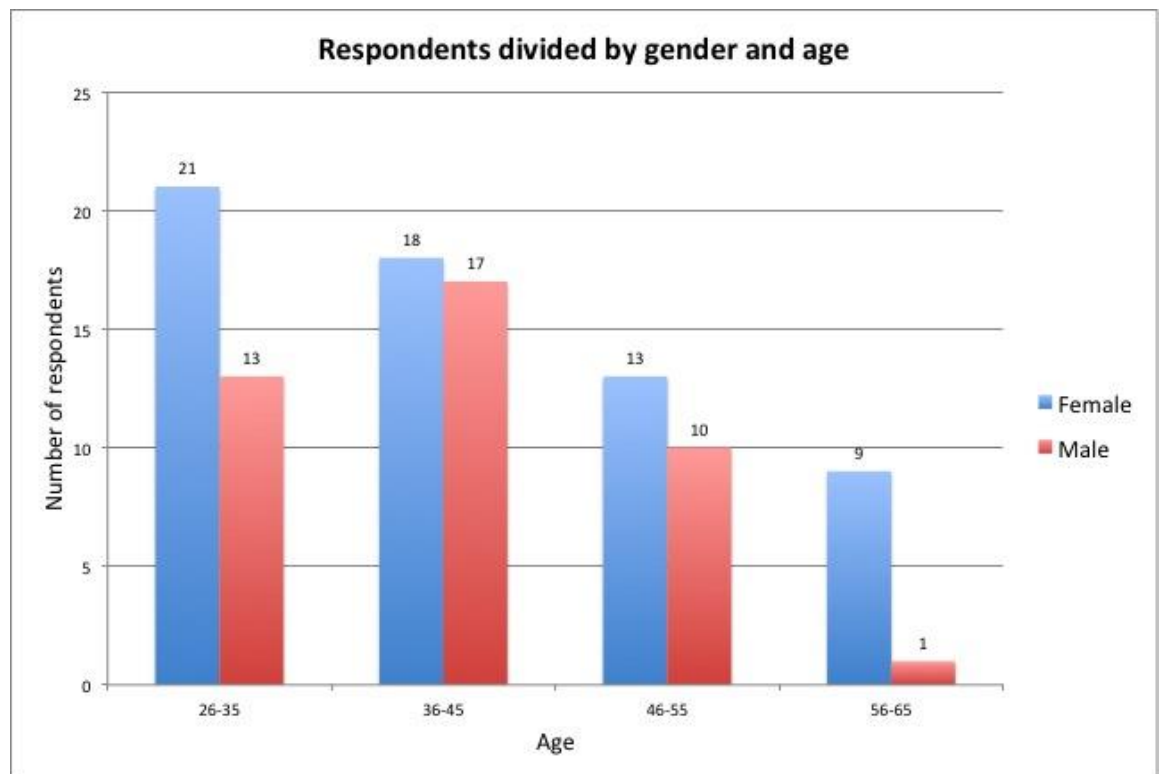


FIGURE 11. Respondents divided by gender and age

Regarding occupation, roughly 43% of the respondents declared to be managers or specialists. The second largest group were entrepreneurs with the share of 31%, and approximately 26% were students, pensioners or belonged to some other occupation groups.

The majority of the respondents with the share of 43% declared being married or in a relationship. Approximately 31% of the respondents announced having a family with children, and about 26% declared being single.

In total the received answers were wide-ranging and diverse. In terms of conducting a profound and extensive research, it is significant to receive answers from as many groups of people as possible. Altogether, we received 102 answers.

## 6.2 Interest towards the activities at VuokattiSport

After clarifying the background information, the purpose was to find out what kind of activities arouses interest among the customers of Nova Arena. The next question was a multiple-choice question, in which the given answer options were the main activities of VuokattiSport.

The figure below presents the activities that emerged as the most interesting among Nova Arena customers. The activities that seemed the most overall interesting were swimming hall, spa & beauty and gym. Since the questionnaire was only available for the present customers of Nova Arena, it was reasonable to assume that the majority of the respondents were interested in different sports and maintaining their health.



FIGURE 12. Interest towards the activities at VuokattiSport

Among women, two of the most interesting activities were swimming hall and spa & beauty, as they both received the rating of over 70%. Other popular activities among female respondents were personal training, gym and outdoor sports facilities. The least interesting activities among women were team sports and skiing.

Among men, the most popular activity was gym, since 61% of the respondents declared being interested in it. Other interesting activities were swimming hall and outdoor activities, with the popularity rate of 49%. The least popular activity among male respondents was team sports.

### 6.3 Testing services at VuokattiSport

The following question aimed to resolve the respondents' interest towards testing their physical health. One of the greatest assets of VuokattiSport is offering high-quality testing services, such as treadmill, lactate control and ski ergo tests. The CEO of VuokattiSport considered it important to research whether there is a demand for testing services among the Russian wellness tourists.

As seen from Figure 13, 71% of the respondents declared not testing their physical health regularly, but are interested in doing so. Approximately 22% of the attendants declared testing their physical health regularly. The remaining 7% of the respondents declared not testing their physical health and not being interested in doing so.

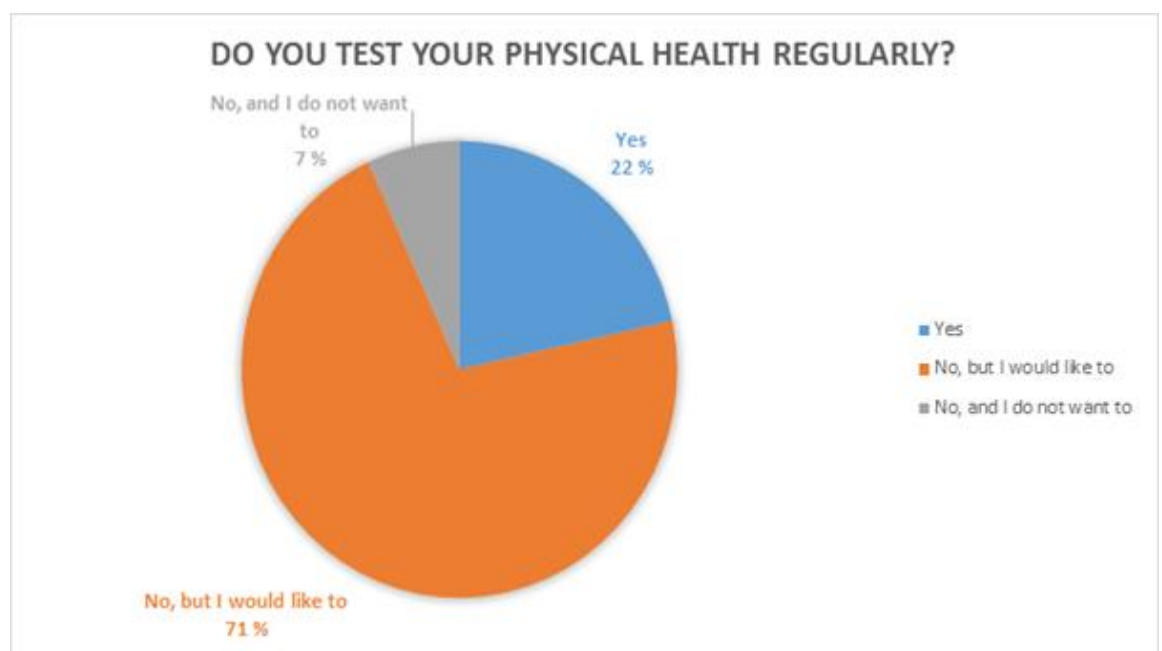


FIGURE 13. Do you test your physical health regularly?

Roughly 75% of the female respondents stated that they do not test their physical health regularly, but are interested in doing so. The corresponding percentage among male respondents was 66%. Based on these answers, it can be concluded that there is a high demand for physical health testing among the customers of Nova Arena.

#### 6.4 Interest towards customized VuokattiSport holiday package

In order to examine the interest, VuokattiSport created an example of customized wellness holiday package for the customers of Nova Arena. This question included brief information about the package as followed:

*“VuokattiSport Holiday Package is an all-inclusive, 5-day-holiday for people interested in different activities and overall well-being. The overall price for 2 people is 1356€ and it covers:*

- *5-day accommodation in VuokattiChalets*
- *daily breakfast, lunch and dinner*
- *testing set: bicycle ergometer, muscle resistance, InBody*
- *2x guided activity - free of choice*
- *tickets to Katinkulta Spa”*

The main objective of our research was to examine the overall interest towards the wellness holidays in VuokattiSport. In the question number 8, we asked the respondents directly whether they are interested in the example package.

The following question was formulated to examine the overall interested towards the package. The respondents were given the opportunity to express their interest and reasons why they were not interested in the package.



As seen from Figure 14, majority (94%) of the respondents declared to be interested in the customized wellness holiday package. Only 5% reported being unsure of their interest, and 1% declared that they are not interested in the package. Based on the given answers, there is a high demand for VuokattiSport holiday packages. The respondents who were not sure about their interest towards the package, did not provide reasons for their lack of interest.

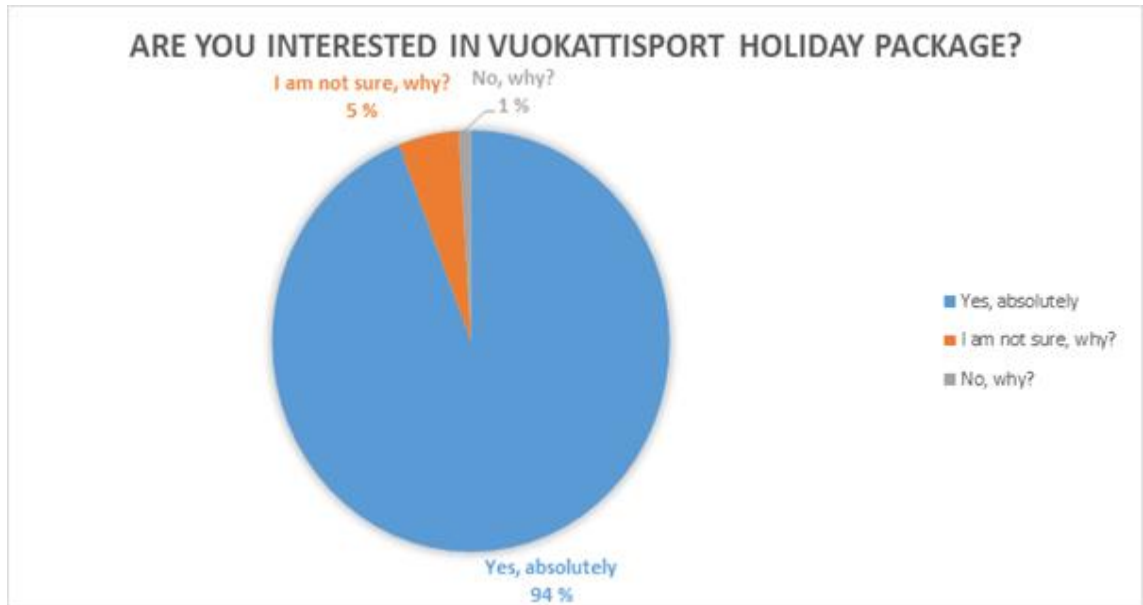


FIGURE 14. Interest towards VuokattiSport holiday package

## 6.5 Additional services

The last question in our survey was to gather suggestions for improving the customized wellness holiday package. This question was an open question giving the respondents an opportunity to share their ideas and thoughts for improvements.

The received suggestions included activities such as dancing, educational and excursion programs as well as programs for children. Other suggestions considered matters such as transportation and eco-tourism. In total, less than 18% of the respondents provided suggestions for improving the package.

## 6.6 Summary of the results

In conclusion, the findings of the research indicate that majority (94%) of the respondents were interested in wellness holidays at VuokattiSport.

The most attractive activities were swimming hall, spa & beauty, gym and personal training. The activities that received least interest were team sports, skiing and outdoor sports facilities. These results refer to the fact that VuokattiSport should improve their operations regarding these activities.

Physical testing awakened great interest among the respondents, as majority (71%) showed interest in physical testing. Based on this information, VuokattiSport should continue investing in physical testing services.

Most importantly, the results indicate that the example holiday package aroused great interest among the respondents. Since there were no significant proposals for improvement in the package, we can conclude that holiday packages with features like these will gain popularity among Russian tourists. Based on this research, the demand for Finnish wellness holidays at VuokattiSport is high, and investing in the Russian market would be profitable.

## 7 EVALUATION

The thesis process began with selecting a topic that we both were interested in. It was important for us to work on a subject that was topical at the moment. We wanted to find a commissioning company that would gain significant value from our research. Our purpose was to carry out a comprehensive study with international focus. We sought for a topic that would challenge us and our expertise in international business.

We found out that VuokattiSport Ltd. was currently expanding its wellness tourism concept and needed contribution with international research focusing on St. Petersburg. After negotiating with Veikko Halonen, the CEO of VuokattiSport, the topic shaped into its current form: The potential of Finnish wellness holidays for Russian tourists: Case VuokattiSport.

Working on this thesis process has been extremely educating and engrossing. The process allowed us to combine both our interest and the knowledge we have gained during our studies. Knowing that our work had a significant value for the commissioning company made working on it extremely worthwhile. Altogether, the thesis process has been a rewarding experience.

When observing the outcome of our study, we feel that our research was successful. Conducting the survey required great contribution in terms of cooperation with multiple parties. As we had prepared the questionnaire carefully, it was easy to gather the results and analyze them. We reached our goals as we were able to provide answers to the research questions.

Evaluating this thesis process critically, the object that could have been planned better was the timing plan of the research. We did not clearly understand how challenging it is to make a research that needs to be translated to another language. Also, doing multiple fixes in the questionnaire took us a lot of time. Since wellness tourism is a relatively fresh topic, there was not much background material yet, and it took a lot of effort to find reliable sources.

During the process we learned multiple new things, such as writing a scientific research and organizing the whole process between two people. We learned important international business skills while collaborating with our Russian partner. We gained an insight of the Russian business culture, which will be a valuable matter in the future.

The most rewarding part of the thesis process was to feel that the commissioning company could make use of our research and exploit our research when conducting new, similar surveys in the future.

As a further research, VuokattiSport could examine the needs of international wellness tourists more closely. Since VuokattiSport is an all-year-round resort, it could be worthwhile if the wellness packages were categorized according to summer and winter activities. The packages could also be more specified for certain target groups, such as tourists seeking for high-intense training holidays or for those seeking for more relaxing wellness holidays. Another idea for improving the operations could be examining the needs of different target groups, such as families or pensioners.

In addition, VuokattiSport could benefit from examining the current sport trends in their rival sports locations. VuokattiSport could turn to account the knowledge of current trends and phenomena and take advantage of the information in targeted marketing and sales. Including trendy sports in the product supply of VuokattiSport would add value to their operations.

VuokattiSport could benefit from the four seasons and focus their winter marketing to countries without proper winter. Similarly, the sports institute could market nature-related holidays to urban destinations. VuokattiSport could also gain cooperation with other sports centers around the world and create similar packages as it did for the customers of Nova Arena.

VuokattiSport is currently undergoing a brand reformation in its tourism operations and is seeking for international customers. Keeping that in mind, the timing of the research was perfect. The results enable VuokattiSport to develop their product supply to a more attractive form. Most importantly, the case company now has a clearer vision of the demands of Russian tourists. Since the example holiday package aroused solid interest among the Russian tourists, VuokattiSport could now enter the Russian markets on a wider scale.

What made this topic challenging and also interesting was the fact that the economic and political situation in Russia has changed radically during the past years. Due to this, almost all the information on Russian tourism that has been published before 2014, is now irrelevant. Knowing this, it was obvious that a fresh, up-to-date research needed to be completed.

In 2017, there have been many signs of the recovery of the Russian economy. Logically, that could lead into a rise in the amount of Russian outbound tourists. It remains to be seen, what are the impacts of it on Finnish wellness tourism.

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**APPENDIX ONE**

VuokattiSport brochure in English.

**APPENDIX TWO**

VuokattiSport brochure in Russian.



