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Typologies of sport clusters based on socio-economic proximity

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Cluster theory is a well-established field of research (Greve, 2009; Martin & Sunley, 2003; Porter, 1998, 2008) and has been an enduring element in national economic policies around the globe (Benner, 2012; Ketels, 2015). Also the sport sector has seen political and economic initiatives for cluster development on national and international level (EU4SportsClusters, 2015; EuroSIMA, 2015; Sporaltec, 2016).

Shilbury (2000), pioneer in this topic, emphasises that in Australia sport clusters are potentially a new form of the sport delivery system in response to environmental changes, e.g., reduced state subsidies for sport. Until today sport clusters have been viewed as one conceptual category. However, this paper suggests a dual typology of sport clusters depending on the level of heterogeneity of cluster members and the type of interorganizational linkages.

This study compares two clusters from the sailing industry to two clusters from the surfing industry. The use of a multiple case study with pairs of similar case studies permits theory development through literal and theoretical replication. Similar results amongst similar cases strengthen theory through literal replication. Differing results across different pairs of cases deepen theory (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Yin, 2009). This qualitative research uses interviews (n=117) and observations (n=17) as the primary data sources, and organizational information (n=47) and archival data (n=27) as secondary data sources.

The results reveal two diametrically opposed models for clusters in the sport industry in terms of socio-economic proximity (i.e., social proximity affecting economic proximity and vice versa (Gerke, Desbordes, & Dickson, 2015)). These two models represent the fundamental logic of community and society (Dalla Pria & Vicente, 2006; Storper, 2005). The logic of a society like cluster is founded in the paradigm of proximity because of complementarity. The two sailing clusters rely on the logic of society because the boat-building projects are complex and require a variety of specialised skills that are supplied by small-and medium-sized cluster members. The creation of a formal cluster governing body accompanies an existing collective logic between much diversified and specialised local actors. The logic of a community like cluster is founded in the paradigm of cognitive proximity. The two surfing clusters rely on the logic of community because cluster members have similar business models, competencies, and value creation processes. There are few buyer- supplier relationships and firms tend to be direct competitors, thus interorganisational linkages tend to be competitive in nature.