



Uncovering the elements impacting stakeholder engagement in the regional branding of North Iceland

The views and attitudes of local tourism companies

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to uncover the elements that influence stakeholder engagement in the destination branding of North Iceland. This is answered through the following three questions: How are the engagement levels of the tourism companies in the regional branding of North Iceland? What elements impact the engagement levels of the tourism companies? and How can these findings add to existing theories about stakeholder engagement in a place branding and destination context?

These questions are answered through the analysis of qualitative interviews with representatives from 15 tourism businesses in the region of North Iceland. Furthermore the analysis is supported by a theoretical framework that consists of stakeholder engagement theories, place branding and DMOs practices as well as an interview with the managing director of Visit North Iceland. Through the method of thematic analysis, three main themes emerged from the data. The themes are; Understanding, Location and Collaboration Circles. The themes all describe elements that were found to impact stakeholder engagement amongst the tourism businesses in the North Iceland region.

The main findings within the theme of understanding were that understanding the benefits of participating had a great impact on stakeholder engagement. For this purpose the effective dissemination of information was found to be fundamental. It was found to influence the understanding that the tourism businesses are able to have of how the collaboration practices and marketing efforts in the area can benefit them. A need for an efficient mode of online real time communication was identified, even though the reality of acquiring this was made very unlikely based on lack of resources in visit North Iceland.

In the theme of Location the major factors that influenced stakeholder engagement were found to be the feeling of connectedness to either the local community or the whole region of North Iceland. Often the tourism businesses, located in the more peripheral areas were more engaged in local collaboration, local tourism associations or local projects, while tourism businesses that were more centrally placed engaged more in the regional branding.

The findings within the final theme, Collaboration Circles, indicated that the most common form of collaboration in North Iceland was happening in small local circles. These local circles fostered a feeling of connectedness, and the people in the local areas were generally quite

engaged through that collaboration. The way that collaboration then took place on a regional scale, in larger circles, was through the coordinating efforts of Visit North Iceland. These efforts were often in the form of specific project within the region, something that also fostered positivity amongst the tourism businesses and thereby further encouraged engagement. This way of structuring collaboration within a destination was also one of the largest contributions of this paper. It can function as a recommendation for other destination with limited resources on how to engage stakeholders through connecting with key members within smaller collaboration circles at the destination.

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1 Introduction

Processes of globalisation, internationalisation and rescaling of statehood have led to an increased competition between regions. Place branding has become one of the central concepts for promoting local competitiveness and for capturing significant mind and market share. (Messely, Dessein & Rogge, 2014, p. 291)

The North region of Iceland has since 2003 focused increasingly on marketing their region collectively and have established Visit North Iceland marketing office with that aim in mind. Their main purpose in the beginning was to coordinate the marketing endeavour of the region (Visit North Iceland, C). Their role in the marketing of North Iceland has been expanding ever since and they are now moving into new territories as a regional DMO (Björn H. Reynisson, 2018). Tourism in the region is steadily growing, the number of members increases each year and there are many destination development projects ongoing. In 2018 the British travel agency, SuperBreak, started operating direct trips between Akureyri and the UK (Visit North Iceland, D). Furthermore, in the fall of 2018, Akureyri will be the host for Vestnorden which is the “most important business-to-business trade show in the North Atlantic region” (Vestnorden, 2018). One of the main purposes of Visit North Iceland is to attract foreign tourists directly to North Iceland, encouraging them to stay longer within the region (Visit North Iceland, E). Bayraktar and Uslay (2017) point out that brand management for destinations has in fact become a popular method for increasing competitiveness. Successful branding is therefore essential for Visit North Iceland in their pursuit of attracting foreign visitors, competing with other destinations on a global scale, and creating awareness of North Iceland internationally. Many Scholars have pointed out that one of the most important elements in place branding processes is the role of stakeholders, since a successful brand is essentially co-created by multiple stakeholders within the destination (Govers, 2011). Stakeholder engagement can be defined as “the practices an organization undertakes to involve stakeholders” (Greenwood, 2007, as cited in Lally, O’Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 5). High levels of stakeholder engagement has been found to positively impact the quality of destination experiences, and therefore systematic management of stakeholder engagement activities is important for the destination (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010). One of the main roles of DMOs such as Visit North

Iceland is to engage its stakeholders and to connect them through different interactions that serve to facilitate and direct cooperation amongst them (Meriläinen & Lammettyinen, 2011).

In this master thesis the collaboration practices and stakeholder engagement within the branding of North Iceland is explored. A qualitative case study was conducted in North Iceland where 15 qualitative interviews were conducted with different companies from all over the North Iceland region. The companies all have a direct association with tourism through their businesses. The aim was to identify general stakeholder engagement levels as well as to uncover different collaboration practices and factors impacting stakeholder engagement. Other scholars have studied stakeholder engagement in a destination context and their findings have revealed different elements that impact stakeholder engagement at destinations (Lally et al, 2015). This study contributes to the knowledge base of factors that impact stakeholder engagement in a regional branding context. The information that this study contributes is furthermore, serves to deepen the understanding of stakeholder engagement practices for destination management organizations worldwide. The findings of the study will also give Visit North Iceland a valuable insight into the attitudes and views of their members, allowing them to review their stakeholder management tactics to increase their stakeholder engagement levels within the destination and with that strengthen their branding effort. This leads us to the problem formulation of this paper:

The aim of this paper is to uncover the elements that influence stakeholder engagement in the destination branding of North Iceland, which is done by answering the following sub-questions:

- How are the engagement levels of the tourism companies in the regional branding of North Iceland?
- What elements impact the engagement levels of the tourism companies?
- How can these findings add to existing theories about stakeholder engagement in a place branding and destination context?

2 Methodology

In the following section the methodology guiding the research paper will be presented. Firstly, the research design and paradigm will be presented. Secondly, the data collection methods will be explained, followed by a presentation of the data analysis method.

2.1 Research design & paradigm

The approach of this paper is an exploration of stakeholder engagement within a destination branding context. The focus is on a certain group of tourism stakeholders, specifically those directly involved in the operation of tourism companies. The region of North Iceland was considered particularly well suited as a case, since there are a lot of ongoing developments in the region and tourism is on a steady rise (Akureyri Municipality, 2016). The regional DMO of North Iceland is quite young and has not had a lot of time nor resources to conduct research in the area. Most of the tourism research done in Iceland, focuses on the whole country and not specifically on the different regions (Arnheiður Jóhannsdóttir, short personal interview, 5/5 2018). The size of the region was also suitable with 20 municipalities located within the region (Association of Local Authorities, 2018), that was deemed interesting as a base for the research.

As written above, the chosen research strategy in this paper is case study research. Yin (2018) defines a case study as “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 15). This case study explores the elements that affect stakeholder engagement amongst tourism companies in North Iceland. The study focuses on the connection between phenomenon and context, with the phenomenon being stakeholder engagement and the context being collaboration practices and place branding processes in North Iceland.

The study is built up around 15 interviews with companies directly involved in tourism as well as one interview with the regional DMO, Visit North Iceland. Multiple interviews were conducted so that patterns in the data could be supported by multiple sources, which Yin (2018) essentially recommends. Yin (2018) furthermore states that a case study benefits from using theory “to guide design data collection, and analysis” (p. 9). In this study, the theory of stakeholder engagement guided the initial idea generation. The

initial hypothesis was that different levels of stakeholder engagement might affect the overall success of place branding processes. There was also an idea that different levels of collaboration might also affect stakeholder engagement amongst tourism stakeholders in North Iceland. This initial hypothesis was used to create the interview guide for interviewing the tourism stakeholders. Initially the study was very open ended, which allowed the study to go where the data might lead.

The purpose of the case study is to use the case of North Iceland as an insight into how stakeholder engagement can be affected and likewise affect other structures in the tourism industry such as collaboration practices. Case studies are very well suited to “analytical generalization”, where the analysis will help “expand and generalize theories” (Yin, 2018, p. 21). “Analytical generalization” means that the conclusion of this paper will be “making an argumentative claim” (Yin, 2018, p. 41). This essentially means that the conclusion of this paper will be expanding on the theory of stakeholder engagement. This is done by analysing the relevant case study data, which is supported by an existing theoretical framework.

The case study is a very versatile approach and is suitable for both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and the case study is not locked on any specific ontological or epistemological viewpoint (Yin, 2018, pp. 16-18). This study has been designed with a qualitative approach to data collection and has a constructivist ontological worldview. This means that the paper takes on the perspective that the social world around us is in a state of continuous construction and deconstruction. This social world is influenced by social actors who then influence it in return (Bryman, 2016, p. 29). Bryman (2016) writes about constructionism that it “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (p.29). Likewise the social world is described by Bitsch Olsen & Pedersen (2008) “... a social and linguistic construct ...” when taking a constructivist stance (p. 151). In this case study this means that the structures in the tourism industry, such as collaborative practices, branding practices, and feelings of engagement only exist and have meaning because of the actors who carry them out and define these actions. The tourism businesses construct their own social reality, which affects how they see certain elements; this process is what can make different companies have different opinions on the same topic. This in turn can affect the actions of the tourism businesses when it comes to collaborative practices and stakeholder engagement.

The epistemological stance of this paper adheres to the overall umbrella of what Bitsch Olsen and Pedersen (2008) categorize as perspectivist (p. 150). In this way of regarding scientific knowledge this paper relies on interpreting reality through language and action, and does not seek an absolute truth (Ibid.). This means that the analysis of this paper will illuminate a truth interpreted by the authors, which is reliant on the worldview and use of the interviewee's language (ibid.). Bryman, (2016) describes this way of regarding social knowledge as interpretivist, and describes its focus to be "... to grasp the subjective meaning of social action" (p. 26). The interpretivist perspective implies that the social world cannot be measured in the same way as the natural world; the same logic applies in this study (Bryman, 2016, p. 24). In order to understand the views and attitudes of the tourism companies, the interpretivist approach is important because the aim is to gain an understanding of a specific social reality, which can only be described in words and interpreted by the authors of this paper.

2.2 Data collection

This case study uses primary data for the analysis, which was collected by doing semi-structured interviews with companies involved in tourism in North Iceland. Furthermore one interview was conducted with Arnheiður Jóhannsdóttir, managing director of Visit North Iceland. The interviews with tourism companies and the interview with the managing director of Visit North Iceland were conducted based on two different interview guides (See appendix B & C). The interview guides were designed to only be a guide, and the interviewees were encouraged to go of tangents and enlighten the interviewers with any information they might have. The interviewers furthermore adapted to the answers and encouraged further information if possible. Bryman (2016) argues that letting the interviewee take the interview down different tangent is positive, and writes that "... 'rambling' or going off at tangents is often encouraged – it gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important" (Bryman, p. 466).

To ensure validity the 15 Interviewees from tourism companies were selected in a way that ensured as much geographical representation of the region as possible. The companies ranged from businesses within the accommodation sector, transportation sector, restaurant sector, and activities sector. The interviewees representing their companies would typically be managers, owners, or key marketing employees with

extensive knowledge of the business. The criteria for selecting the cases were chosen based on the characteristics of stakeholders within North Iceland. The majority of tourism companies in Iceland are small, so a logical choice was to choose a typical selection of tourism companies in the region. It was important to include companies in different sectors, such as restaurants, hotels and activity companies to ensure differing perspectives on the tourism sector. It was also a contributing factor that some of the companies were operating mainly in tourism, but other catered equally to locals and tourism. Including different companies of different sizes and from different areas was considered important for the validity of the findings. Most of the companies were selected using an online list of companies operating in North Iceland, posted on the website of Visit North Iceland (Visit North Iceland, B). In some cases the companies were selected using a snowball sampling method, where word of mouth led to contact. Bryman (2016) categorizes snowball sampling as belonging under convenience sampling, and is often used in qualitative research (p. 188).

Primary data

Most of the interviewees agreed to have their names and company names public, although some interviewees opted for anonymity. The type of anonymity provided to the interviewee was agreed upon individually. Some wanted their names and business to be left out of the paper, while others just wanted their names to be left out. A list of the interviewees and their companies will be presented in the table below. Anonymous interviewees will be presented as interviewee A, B, C or D, and the name of their company will be excluded or included as per their request. The list includes different types of companies within North Iceland region. There are in total around 210 companies that are registered as members with Visit North Iceland and the majority of them are small tourism businesses (Visit North Iceland, B). Visit North Iceland does acknowledge that the region is made up by different areas. In the ongoing destination management plan, the region is split up by these categories (Visit North Iceland, J). The fifteen interviews conducted for this study represent each of those four areas and the representatives include different businesses of different sizes. An overview on the interviewees will be outlined in the table below:

(See appendix D to T for transcripts. See appendix A for map over the North Iceland region where the interviews took place.)

	Tourism Business	Interviewee
1	Icelandic Seal Center, Hvammstangi, Húnaþing Vestra region. Located in the peripheral area in the west of the North Iceland region.	Sigurður Líndal Þórisson: Managing director of the Icelandic Seal Centre and chairman of Visit Hunathing Tourism Association.
2	An anonymous farm accommodation and restaurant, Húnaþing Vestra region. Located in the peripheral area in the west of the North Iceland region.	She is an anonymous owner of the establishment and will be referred to as Interviewee A in the analysis chapter.
3	Glaumbær Museum, Skagafjörður region. Located in the northwestern part of the North Iceland region.	Sigríður Sigurðardóttir: Director of Glaumbær Museum.
4	Tindastóll ski area and Drangey Tours, Skagafjörður region. Located in the northwestern part of the region.	Viggo Jónsson: Manager of Tindastóll ski area and owner of Drangey Tours.
5	Infinity Blue – Floating experience, the town of Hofsós, Skagafjörður region. Located in the northern part of the North Iceland region.	Auður Björk Birgisdóttir: Owner of Infinity Blue.
6	An anonymous café, Siglufjörður. Located in the northern part of the North Iceland region.	She is an anonymous owner of the establishment and will be referred to as Interviewee B in the analysis chapter.

7	North Sailing - Whale watching company, Húsavík. Located in the northern part of the North Iceland region.	She is an anonymous sales representative at North Sailing and will be referred to as Interviewee C in the analysis chapter.
8	Mývatn Activity, Lake Mývatn region. Located in the eastern part of the North Iceland region.	Ragnar Davíð Baldursson: Owner and manager of Mývatn Activity.
9	Mývatn Nature Baths, Lake Mývatn region. Located in the eastern part of the North Iceland region.	She is an anonymous employee at Mývatn Nature Baths and will be referred to as Interviewee D in the analysis chapter.
10	Hlíðarfjall ski area, Akureyri. Located in the central part of the North Iceland region.	Guðmundur Karl Jónsson: General Manager of Hlíðarfjall ski area.
11	SBA Norðurleið - Icelandic bus company, offices in Akureyri and Reykjavík. Located in the central part of the North Iceland region.	Bergþór Erlingsson: Head of Marketing of SBA Bus Company.
12	Strikið restaurant and Bryggjan restaurant, Akureyri. Located in the central part of the North Iceland region.	Heba Finnsdóttir: Owner and manager of both restaurants.
13	Hotel Northern Lights, Raufarhöfn. Located in the northeast corner of the North Iceland region.	Einar Sigurðsson: Owner and hotel manager of Hotel Northern Lights.
14	Kópasker Hostel, Kópasker. Located in the northeast corner of the North Iceland region.	Benedikt H. Björgvinsson: Owner and manager of Kópasker Hostel.

15	Báran Restaurant, Þórshöfn. Located in the northeast corner of the North Iceland region.	Nick Peros: Owner and manager of Báran Restaurant.
	DMO	Interviewee
16	Visit North Iceland, Akureyri. Located in the central area of the North Iceland region.	Arnheiður Jóhannsdóttir: Managing Director of Visit North Iceland

2.3 Interview and transcription

The majority of the interviews were conducted in person by the researchers during a 10 day field research trip in North Iceland in April, 2018. Those interviews were recorded using an iPhone recorder and then later transcribed by hand by the authors of this paper. Three of the interviews were conducted by phone due to difficulty of access. Those interviews were recorded as well and transcribed along with the others. Two of the interviews were conducted in Icelandic due to the language restrictions and preferences of those interviewees. Those interviews were translated directly from Icelandic to English during the transcription phase, and it is indicated in the Appendix that the original language was Icelandic. The remainder of the interviews were conducted mainly in English, but the interview guide also included the questions in Icelandic should the interviewees need a translation to better understand the question. Furthermore, some interviewees did also express themselves or seek further guidance using Icelandic on occasions during the interviews conducted in English. The meaning was usually translated on the spot or was translated during the transcriptions phase. These instances were not deemed to have a major influence on the potential meaning and are as a rule not indicated specifically in the transcripts in the appendix.

When conducting interviews there is a certain aspect of translation and interpretation happening between the oral, recorded and written transcript of the interview (Kvale, 2007, pp. 92-93). The transcriptions for the purpose of this paper focused on transcribing the meaning that the interviewee and interviewers were trying to convey.

The interviews are therefore not transcribed ad verbatim, and the transcripts leave out false starts, interruptions, verbal tics etc. Furthermore simple grammatical mistakes that bare no meaning to the context were corrected, this could for instance be the use of was instead of were or the switching of words that were put in incorrect order. This gives the transcript a more reader-friendly outlay, which makes later coding easier. According to Kvale (2007) it is encouraged and considered a good practise to adapt the transcription style to the later purpose of the transcript (p. 95). However, the rules for transcription should be clearly laid out for the transcribers to follow (Ibid.). Besides the above mentioned guidelines, the following two indicators were used, which were adapted from Kvale (2007):

- Single parentheses around words that are hard to decipher or completely unintelligible:
 - If the word is hard to decipher then the best guess of what the interviewee said is put in within the parenthesis.
 - If completely unintelligible, it is written like this: (unintelligible).
- Double parentheses around words that explain context e.g.: ((Phone rang and interview was paused))

2.4 Data analysis

The method used for analysing the primary data in this paper was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an increasingly popular method when conducting qualitative analysis, which is based on codes or themes found in the data (Bryman, 2016, pp. 584-585). Codes are found in the initial reading of the data, and they give way to themes when codes of similar nature are found (Ibid. 584). The codes found must of course have relevance to the research focus in order to be included (Ibid). The codes where decided in an evolving process, where the first codes where based purely on what was immediately present in the text. For example an initial code could be: “this has something to do with how they collaborate in their local area”. Before these initial codes, the authors understanding was of course influenced by the theory the interview guides were based on. In this way the evolvment of the codes became a hermeneutic process, where the codes became more precise as the data was reread, and greater understanding of the connections in the data influenced the next read over and recoding.

Thematic analysis is a preferred method, when the purpose is to expand theoretical literature in a particular area of research (Ibid). When organizing codes into themes, it can be very relevant to look at the theories that create the backbone of the paper in order to gauge any relevant themes that relate to headlines in the theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2003 in Bryman, 2016, p. 586). During the analysis phase of this paper the chosen theories of place branding and stakeholder engagement helped guide the coding process, ensuring a steady focus along the way on the chosen study topic, which then helped the condensation of the codes into themes.

For the specific steps of the thematic analysis this paper followed the proposed six steps presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) (p. 87):

1. Familiarisation with the data: Before coding started the interviews were transcribed by the authors and then re-read in their written form. This provided ample opportunity to start understanding the experiences of the interviewees and making initial connections between the context in the interviews.

2. Coding: The next step was a step by step re-read of all the interviews. In this process each text bit was given a code that conveyed the context and meaning of said text piece. The text was coded by both of the authors and disagreements about codes were discussed.

3. Searching for themes: After all the interviews had been thoroughly coded, a connection between various codes started to emerge. This emergence of common characteristics helped organize different codes into developing themes. These themes were as such not directly guided by the theory, but rather emerged from the data. At first five overall themes were detected: *Akureyri as Centre*, *Periphery*, *Rural Tourism*, *Collaboration Circles*, and *Understanding*. Documents were then created and all the relevant text bits were moved into the five categories.

4. Reviewing themes: Each document was then thoroughly examined, as initial analysis began and subcategories within the themes started to emerge. While working with the data the themes were condensed to three overall themes instead of five, as it became evident that *Akureyri as Centre*, *Periphery*, and *Rural Tourism* seemed belonged under the overall theme of *Location*. *Akureyri as Centre* and *Periphery* then became subcategories and *Rural Tourism* seemed to belong under the subcategory of *Periphery*. Furthermore the overall understanding of the themes deepened and some text bits started to have greater connection to other themes than initially decided.

5. Defining and naming themes: After re-sorting the data and a second round of more thorough analysis the final themes became: *Location*, *Collaboration Circles*, and *Understanding*. This led to the final round of assessing the themes and their subcategories to ensure that the analysis was coherent within the categories.

6. Writing up: The writing up process in this paper was not the final step after having conducted the analysis. Rather meta text was added throughout the thematic analysis and quotes from the interviews were moved around as the themes solidified. Only the final sorting and rewriting happened after the final themes were decided. Furthermore, interpretation happened throughout the entire process of coding and dividing the data into themes. The interpretation in thematic analysis is a circular process, which starts with an initial understanding of the data, and is then reinterpreted repeatedly as the codes become clearer and the themes are crystallized. In this way the thematic analysis of this paper followed a hermeneutic process of interpretation.

3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study rests within the field of place branding and stakeholder collaboration in a destination context with a special focus on stakeholder engagement processes. In the following chapters theories of place branding, co-creation and DMOs will be presented in order to give the reader the context of this paper's theoretical setting. Building on top of this, the chosen focus of stakeholder engagement theories will be presented, which will provide the basis for the analysis of the interview data.

3.1 Place Branding

The theory of place branding helps create the theoretical foundation of the theoretical area this paper is based in. Place brands are a construction of meaningful, distinctive and essentially a co-created image of a place which in return aims to construct name awareness of the place in question (Govers, 2011, p. 230). Place branding can be applied to various places ranging from municipalities, cities, regions and nations (Govers & Go, 2009 as cited in Messely, Dessein & Rogge, 2014, p. 293). In the context of this paper the focus will be on the place branding of a region.

It is important to distinguish between place branding and place marketing. Place marketing is demand driven in a sense that the image broadcasted is created to fit the expectations of visitors. A place brand however is supply driven in a sense that it is built on the collective identity of the place and is essentially designed to manage the reputation and image of the place (Govers, 2011, p. 230). Before a place branding initiative is launched, it is therefore important for places to uncover the image and identity of the place, often referred to as place DNA (Cuypers, 2016). Place branding can therefore be seen as a way of creating a shared image, which will help the marketing efforts of the individual stakeholders. Anholt (2010) explains that when people are talking about place branding, "... they are talking about doing something to enhance the brand image of the place: place branding is believed to be a way of making places famous." (Anholt, 2010., p. 7). When the focus lies on enhancing the brand image, it focuses on improving the customers' perceptions of the brand in questions: "'Brand image' is the set of beliefs or associations relating to that name or sign in the mind of the consumer..." (Anholt, 2010., p. 7). Thus

place branding deals with ways of communicating or marketing to consumers, which will cause them to improve their mental associations with a place (Anholt, 2010., p. 7).

Anholt (2010) further states that there is no direct method to build brand equity, and branding:

Branding, in other words, is a process that goes on largely in the mind of the consumer – the accumulation of respect and liking for the brand – and cannot be seen as a single technique or set of techniques that directly builds respect or liking. (Anholt, 2010, p. 10)

Place branding is both about building a good reputation and communicating this to potential visitors. When the aim is to improve the international reputation of a place, then the focus should not solely be on the branding initiative. The focus should not be on direct marketing and slogans, but to put focus on improving and developing the destination, since that ultimately will affect the destination experience as well (Anholt, 2010., p. 10).

Destination branding is ultimately a useful approach since it strengthens the collective image and/or message of the destination by providing the various stakeholders with a unified medium to reach their target audience, or as Anholt (2010) describes it “If the private operators are the dots, the job of government is to join them up in the end-user's mind” (p.3).

3.1.1 Stakeholders in tourism development

Before heading into discussing different approaches to place branding it is first necessary to define the term stakeholders in a tourism development context. According to the definition of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2005) “The term “stakeholders in tourism development” includes the following players” (UNWTO, 2005, page 7, paragraph 32):

- National governments
- Local governments with specific competence in tourism matters
- Tourism establishments and tourism enterprises
- Including their associations
- Institutions engaged in financing tourism projects

- Tourism employees
- Tourism professionals and tourism consultants
- Trade unions of tourism employees
- Tourism education and training centers
- Travellers, including business travellers, and visitors to tourism destinations, sites and attractions
- Local populations and host communities at tourism destinations through their representatives
- Other juridical and natural persons having stakes in tourism development including non-governmental organizations specializing in tourism and directly involved in tourism projects and the supply of tourism services.

3.1.2 Co-creative and participatory approaches in place branding

The growing recognition of the importance of stakeholder collaboration in a place branding context has sparked further research in the field. The application of co-creation theory and participatory approach in place branding has been gaining the attention of many experts in the field of place branding (Govers, 2011).

“Place branding is by nature co-created” (Thelander & Säwe 2015, p. 324). Place branding is a complex process that needs to involve a diverse group of stakeholders to ensure that the brand image created derives from the collective identity of the stakeholders (Thelander & Säwe, 2015). Kavaratzis (2012) points out that in order for successful branding to take place then it is important that the diverse group of local players are highly motivated and engaged in the process. Therefore branding initiatives that fail to engage the stakeholders and manage to alienate different stakeholders almost always fail.

Aitken & Campelo (2011) on a similar note stress that in order to implement a sustainable and authentic brand then a bottom-up approach, founded on co-creation would be well suited. Kavaratzis (2012) highlights the applicability of co-creation in a place-branding context and says, “This is a conceptualization that arguably considers the full dynamics of place brands and addresses the need to involve stakeholders in the branding process” (p. 8). Govers (2011) also stresses the need for a bottom-up approach in place branding. He points out that a co-created approach is crucial for the success of branding strategies, since it is ultimately the actual civil society as a whole that live and communicate

the brand. This means that a brand that does not involve the different layers of the society including public, private, and the residents cannot represent an authentic place image, which the brand is built on (Govers, 2011). Warnaby, Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2015) also stress the importance of including everyone in the process and ensuring that the process is as consensual as possible. This can of course take some time to achieve, but it will in the long term ensure that the brand is communicated effectively to its target audience.

The participatory approach to branding focuses on the often overlooked and forgotten impact in place branding, which is the role of the residents (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013). Braun, Kavaratzis and Zenker (2013) advocate for the application of a participatory approach, which involves the residents in each step of the place branding process. According to them, the residents should be an integrated part of the place brand, because they essentially are the living essence of the brand. They point out that if the residents are engaged in the branding then it is more likely that they become brand ambassadors. Brand ambassadors are those who are highly engaged and positively motivated in the brand image, brand ambassadors can therefore affect others around them, which can strengthen the collective image of the brand. Residents are ideal brand ambassadors since it is ultimately them who live out the brand image and their communication is considered to be an authentic representation of the brand. Residents are also citizens in the area and have certain political power since they can vote and in this way affect the overall political landscape, which the place brand initiative is reliant on. Including the residents in the place branding process is therefore absolutely crucial for successful place branding. Many places around the world have already opted for this approach, which can be noted in how many branding strategies around the world have started to use the voices of their residents in their branding initiatives (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013).

3.1.3 DMOs

After having presented why places have begun to opt for branding strategies and the different approaches that can be applied in those processes, the definition of the organizations that are usually in charge of managing place branding initiatives follows below.

With increase in tourism worldwide, destinations have found themselves increasingly competing with other places worldwide. In order to gain advantage in this

global arena, many destinations have opted for the establishment of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to provide essential leadership and to manage the destination and its various elements in the tourism system (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010, p. 572). March and Wilkinson (2009) have pointed out that one of the main challenges for tourism managers in the current tourism landscape is to “synchronise the dynamic, competing forces, interests and resource requirements of disparate stakeholder groups through effective structuring of inter organizational relationships” (cited in Lally, O’Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 3). The DMOs have an important role in this process, since they are ultimately the main actors in the promotion, marketing, managing, and synchronising of the different elements at the destination level (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010, p.572). According to Atorough & Martin (2012) DMOs are independent organizations whose main function is to facilitate cooperation toward a common objective which represents the collective interest of the destination. In doing so they must prioritise the common interest of all and not focus too much on individual interests.

DMOs were originally defined as *Destination Marketing Organizations*. Their function used to be mainly focused on marketing activities that had the main purpose of attracting visitors to their destination. Although marketing is still in the foreground with many DMOs today, there is a shift in thinking, which is reflected in the changed definition of DMOs which nowadays is defined as *Destination Management Organizations* (Sheehan, Vargas-Sanchéz, Presenza & Abbate, 2016, p. 549).

Gartrell (1994) as cited in (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010, p. 572) listed up the main functions of DMOs accordingly:

- The DMO should provide tourist information to visitors both pre travel and upon arrival.
- The DMO should take on advocacy and leadership role.
- The DMO should act as an intermediary between external players that are involved in bringing visitors to the destination.
- The DMO should strive to coordinate and unite the diverse stakeholders in their area.
- The DMO should actively promote tourism in public and communicate its importance to the residents.

- The DMO should help facilitate tourism development in the destination in the form of new attractions and sites, as well as developing and promoting a competitive destination image, aimed at attracting visitors.

Sheehan, Vargas-Sánchez, Presenza & Abbate, (2016) point out that DMOs are the primary liaison between internal and external stakeholders at the destination. The engagement with both types of stakeholders has increased with DMOs moving away from a purely marketing perspective, and focusing increasingly on destination management. This shift does however require the DMOs to be proficient in knowledge management. The role of the DMOs in the light of this is therefore mainly to engage with external and internal stakeholders. At the same time they should actively identify their needs and learn from them in order to enable knowledge building through research, which ultimately helps them to fulfil their role in destination management (p. 549).

According to Presenza, Sheehan & Ritchie (2005) the responsibilities of DMOs are twofold. One is concerned with marketing and branding the destination externally and the other has to do with internal development of the destination. The overall function is aimed at attracting visitors to the destination through a variety of activities, both internally and externally. See table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the activities of the DMO categorized as either EDM or IDD.

External Destination Marketing Activities		Internal Destination Development Activities	
Web Marketing	e ₁	Visitor Management	i ₁
Events, Conferences and Festivals	e ₂	Information/Research	i ₂
Cooperative Programs	e ₃	Coordinating Tourism Stakeholders	i ₃
Direct Mail	e ₄	Crisis Management	i ₄
Direct Sales	e ₅	Human Resources Development	i ₅
Sales Blitzes	e ₆	Finance and Venture Capital	i ₆
Trade Shows	e ₇	Resource Stewardship	i ₇
Advertising	e ₈	Quality of the Visitor Experience	i ₈
Familiarization Tours	e ₉		
Publications and Brochures	e ₀		

(Arbogast, Deng & Maumbe, 2017, p. 2)

The DMOs **Internal Destination Development activities (IDD)** relate to the entire function and activity of the DMO apart from marketing activities. The DMOs capabilities to establish and ensure IDD depends on various elements, such as: The strength of its relationships with stakeholders, as well as their position (centrality) and strength within

the destination network (Presenza, Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005). It relies strongly on the DMOs capability to coordinate its stakeholders while facilitating research and information as well as providing a frame for visitor management. Once this foundation is in place then the other elements of the IDD can be established by the DMO or by different stakeholders. These elements are presented in table 1 and are comprised of human resources development, quality of the visitor experience, resource stewardship, finance and venture capital as well as crisis management (Arbogast, Deng & Maumbe, 2017, p. 2).

The DMOs **External Destination Management Activities (EDM)** includes all external activities that are primarily aimed at influences outside the destination. Such activities include web marketing, travel shows, press trips, advertising, sales, brochure publications, conferences, festivals, events, cooperative programs, and direct mail (Arbogast, Deng & Maumbe, 2017, p. 2).

One of the most essential and challenging function of DMOs has to do with stakeholder engagement. According to Meriläinen & Lammetyinen (2011), the main role of DMOs is to engage stakeholders and to connect them through different interactions that serve to facilitate and direct cooperation amongst the stakeholders. Bornhorst, Ritchie and Sheehan (2010) state that successful coordination and engagement of stakeholders has been linked to increasing the DMOs success. Ample emphasis on stakeholders in a DMOs strategy is therefore essential for the success of the DMOs (p. 588). Because of this stakeholder collaboration is essential for destination success (Peric, Đurkin & Lamot, 2014; Quinlan, 2008; March & Wilkinson, 2009). March and Wilkinson (2009) also point out that destination success can be directly contributed to how stakeholders interconnect at a destination. In recent years many studies have focused on the complicated and diverse relationships between the various stakeholders and how those relationships impact the marketing efforts and tourism development at the destination (d'Angela & Go, 2009).

The review above covers many of the typical functions and roles carried out by DMOs worldwide. It is however important to keep in mind that the DMOs functional and organizational structures can differ, as they are ultimately dependent on the unique attributes of the environment they are shaped by, and the particular mix of stakeholders at the destination (Atorough & Martin, 2012, 40).

3.2. Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a widely recognized term in tourism planning and it is considered fundamental for DMOs to know how to effectively engage their stakeholders (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010). The concept has developed from Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder theory and has since been applied increasingly in the field of tourism (Sisek, 2001 as referenced in Saftić, Težak & Luk, 2011, p. 2). First a short introduction of stakeholder theory is presented as well as a short recount of how it has influenced tourism studies. Finally the term "stakeholder engagement" and its application in a destination context will be outlined.

3.2.1 Stakeholder Theory

The term stakeholder can be traced back to the work of R. Edward Freeman in the book "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach", which was first published in 1984 and has since been widely referenced. Freeman theorised about relationships within organizations and between organizations as well as any business, person or organization, which the company were in contact with, and all of those were defined as stakeholders (Freeman, 2010). Freeman himself conceptualises stakeholders as such:

Simply put, a stakeholder is any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of a corporation's purpose. Stakeholders include employees, customers, suppliers, stockholders, banks, environmentalists, government and other groups who can help or hurt the Corporation. (Freeman, 2010, p. vi)

Even though the discovery of stakeholder theory has been widely credited to Freeman, he himself points out, that he simply wrote down the prevalent thoughts and ideas of the time (Freeman, 2010, pp. v-vi). The theory is a reaction to the needs of the time period, where status quo in the business world were being disrupted, something Freeman describes as "Turbulent Times" (Freeman, 2010, pp. 4-27). Basically the business world of the time was getting more interconnected and stakeholders were influencing each other increasingly (Ibid). Businesses needed to look beyond only their own products and the market in a static world and towards the importance of relationships in a world of turbulence (Ibid). Since 1984 the stakeholder theory has been developed greatly and

vocabulary has been expanded. In the article “Stakeholder Theory: The State of the Art” from 2010, which leans on the book of the same title, the authors Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Purnell, and De Colle summarise the important notions in stakeholder theory. According to the authors, stakeholder theory is in its basic form about value creation and value trading in a way that is ethical within the confines of the capitalistic environment (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Purnell & De Colle, 2010). Furthermore, a big part of the picture is educating the management on how to achieve this (Ibid). The goal of management is to create and distribute value between stakeholders through the management of stakeholder relationships (Freeman, 2010).

3.2.2 The stakeholder approach

Ever since the publication of Murphy’s (1985) community approach, there has been a growing awareness of stakeholders’ roles in tourism (Waligo, Clarke & Hawkins, 2013). Murphy (1988) also talked about the importance of mutually beneficial partnerships for successful tourism planning. Hall (1999) and Simpson (2008) both highlighted the need of creating links with stakeholders, while, Getz and Timur (2005) make the case that tourism stakeholders have a significant impact on tourism development projects.

Stakeholder theory has been used as the foundation of the stakeholder approach, which has been increasingly applied in tourism studies and derives from the same fundamental principles that Freeman laid out (Sisek, 2001 as referenced in Saftić, Težak & Luk, 2011, p. 2).

The tourism market has embraced the stakeholder approach as a way to enhance competitiveness (Saftić, Težak & Luk, p. 4). The approach has received considerable attention in the field of tourism where a number of scholars have looked into the implementation of the stakeholder approach within the tourism destination management context (Burns & Howard, 2003; Li, 2006; Byrd & Gustake, 2006; Byrd, 2007; d’Angella & Go, 2009).

When working with stakeholder approach, all components in the tourism process are viewed as stakeholders (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernande, 2016, p. 126). The components can be individuals or organizations, both public and private, and these components are linked via the interconnected relationships (Ibid.). Stakeholder Approach has the viewpoint that tourism is dependent on the interactions between the different

components or stakeholders involved with the tourist service, such as “... *the public or private organisations that own the different tourist services, tourist facilities or tourist resources-attractions in the territory.*” (Ibid.). There is a need for a functioning relationship between different stakeholders in order to drive a successful tourism industry (Ibid.).

3.2.3 Stakeholder engagement

“Stakeholder engagement is collectively a philosophy, a strategy, an organisational capability, a process and a range of interaction instruments” (Lally, O’Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 2).

Stakeholder engagement is sometimes referred to by different terminologies, such as citizen or public participation, active citizenship and community, or stakeholder involvement. The terms all generally imply an interactive process between members of different sorts, such as of the public and/or private and non-profit organizations as well as government agency’s representatives with the aim of including participant’s direct voices in decisions that affect them (Munro-Clarke, 1992 as cited in Pforr & Brueckner, 2016).

Meaningful stakeholder engagement is widely accepted, and in its form of active citizen involvement it is seen as essential to the survival of democracy in the increasingly individualized world (Pforr & Brueckner, 2016).

Managing destinations is a highly complicated undertaking. The nature of tourism planning is very much political in nature, which is due to the fact that there are so many different interests that need to be considered in the managing and planning process of a tourist destination. Because of this, governance has become a very important aspect in tourism managing and planning, since it can help with establishing networks, fostering partnerships, and encouraging collaborations between the industry, community and government (Bramwell, 2010; Wesley & Pforr, 2010; Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Hall, 2011; Healy, Rau & McDonagh, 2012; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

The change in governance structure over the last 30 years has had quite an impact on government - society relations, and as a result there has been an increase in collaboration in relation to policy making (Vernon, Essex, Pinder & Curry, 2005). This change has allowed for a more inclusive form of governance, where public and private sector can take a more active role in planning (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Dredge, 2006; Timur & Getz, 2008; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). This open political space between private and

public actors allows for a more effective governance which positively affects stakeholder engagement levels (Fischer, 2006; Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Bramwell, 2011).

The list of notable advantages and benefits that stakeholder engagement can bring about is extensive. The benefits vary from positively affecting social and political acceptance of different processes, to the duration and longevity of the process outcomes. Stakeholder engagement in the context of community involvement has been linked to improving communication and relationships between stakeholders and the governments. It also enables increased community empowerment, better risk communication, and ownership of outcomes and processes. Furthermore it enables better sharing of power, expertise and knowledge, while establishing increased accountability and transparency (Pforr & Brueckner, 2016). Active engagement of stakeholders in decision making and planning also results in a better matching of their expectations, needs and interests (Mahjabeen, Shresha & Dee, 2009).

Furthermore, this process of engagement, deliberation and interaction, which can be described as “participatory governance,” is positively linked to enhancing planning processes with its shared decision making and collaboration amongst stakeholders (John & Cole, 2000; Fischer, 2006; Wesley & Pforr, 2010). According to Wesley & Pforr (2010) the key principles for tourism planning and policymaking are rooted in governance discourse that relates to collaboration, power politics, democracy, stakeholder management, community planning, decentralization, coordination, community participation and institutional arrangements. Stakeholder engagement has been increasingly viewed as an important factor when it comes to successful public and private sector processes. It is considered particularly important in the public policy arena, because of the importance placed on governments to respond to stakeholder’s needs and demands, since stakeholder participation is crucial in a democratic context (Munro-Clarke, 1992 as cited in Pforr & Brueckner, 2016). High levels of stakeholder engagement results in better quality destination experience, for that reason then, systematic management of stakeholder engagement activities is important for the destination (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010). Stakeholder engagement is however by no means a straightforward and easy task. It is a highly complicated process that involves a high number of different players.

3.2.4 How to engage stakeholders

DMOs can benefit from studies that emphasize on stakeholder relationships and help develop an understanding of stakeholders needs, expectations and perceptions (d'Angella & Go, 2009). Those types of studies can take a focus on engagement processes at destinations. In the context of learning about those processes that can affect stakeholder engagement then Pforr and Brueckner (2016) in their recent study on stakeholder engagement in tourism planning point towards a summary by Tuler and Webler (1999). They consider it to be “accepted here as a form of consensus on the foundations of good, ideal, or successful engagement processes” (Pforr & Brueckner, 2016, p. 65). The elements listed in the summary below are furthermore supported by the findings of Brueckner et al (2006), Wray (2011) and McCool and Guthrie (2001). The recommendations were developed from a qualitative study with the aim of identifying what stakeholders in a forest policy making process viewed as a “good” process. There were in total seven categories that got developed. Below is a table listing up the categories and their characteristics:

Access to the process
This category connects to involvement and fairness. Essentially “the importance of physically getting people present and involved in deliberative settings” (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 443). Furthermore it connects to providing an equal opportunity for involvement in the process from start to finish as well as reaching all groups, and not having preferred groups that have an unfair advantage of being included in the process. It is important that people feel that they have an equal chance of being involved and being heard. The feeling of inclusion is linked to lowering disagreement with the overall outcome (Ibid.).
Power to influence process and outcomes
This category relates to power relations and the need for a process that is free from prejudice amongst its participants. It revolves around people's level of influence on the process in question. It essentially highlights the importance of not giving people unfair advantages or excluding their influence, which is based on different levels of resources or traits that separates them from the majority and impedes their impact and participation in the process (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 444).

Access to information

This category highlights the need for a good flow of information between all parties. The information needs to be sourced both from the perspective of the community and participants in the process, but also from an expert opinion's viewpoint, as well as the managers of the process. The information sourced within the community and from an expert's view needs to be communicated clearly to the public. This should be done so they can recognise that the managers are indeed using the information, which they are sourcing from the public and getting from experts. This flow of information is useful for advancing knowledge and facilitating learning and understanding (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 445-446).

Structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions

This category refers to the importance of how interactions are structured and framed in a planning process. Tuler and Webler (1999) directly quote one of their interviewees who said that: "The process should reach out to as many people as possible" (p. 444). It is usually the managers and official planners of the process that need to facilitate the structural characteristics of the interactions, which is typically in the form of meetings. The meetings need to be carefully managed, so that every participant is heard equally and they need to make sure to establish a sense of equality amongst everyone (Ibid.).

Facilitation of constructive personal behaviour

This category is connected to the former category that has to do with promoting constructive interaction, since personal behaviour is very much connected to the act of interacting. The facilitation of constructive personal behaviour entails that "people should treat each other with respect." (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 444). The facilitation of constructive behaviour rests largely with the individuals themselves, but organizers and managers of planning processes can however influence and help facilitate constructive behaviour during meetings. "For example, ground rules that clearly define proper and improper behaviour help individuals moderate their own behaviour. Formal rules and the presence of a meeting facilitator can promote oversight by peers or the facilitator." (Ibid.).

Adequate analysis

Relates closely to the former category “access to information” and highlights the importance of ensuring the quality standards of data and analysis. The term accountability was also related to this matter through the view that the emphasis should be on making sure that decision-making processes need to reflect the understanding of the issues and not driven by politics (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p.446).

Enabling of social conditions necessary for future processes

The final category relates to “how a process in which participants currently find themselves can create or re-create the conditions necessary to allow future policymaking processes to occur”(Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 447). The principles that relate to the re-creation of the elements that are essential for future policy have to do with:

- 1) **Resolving conflict** in order to make sure that it’s managed properly and not just left to escalate, causing increasing conflicts amongst different stakeholders (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 447).
- 2) Another principle has to do with understanding and **sensitivity in regards to the cost of things**, since things that are viewed as not cost-effective often will reduce support for proposals within policy making (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 447).
- 3) **Better relationship building** amongst the different interest groups within a region was viewed as important, since “the improvement of working relationships among disputants can lay the groundwork for continued constructive deliberations about policy.”(Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 447).
- 4) Finally the need to **promote a sense of place** was outlined as an essential element since, “a sense of place or community can give people a stake in outcomes and a desire to be engaged in the formulation of policy” (Tuler & Webler, 1999, p. 447).

Quinlan, Lally and O’Donovan (2013) and Lally, O’Donovan and Quinlan (2015) have focused on stakeholder engagement in two separate studies which both had the objective of pinpointing the best practices that engage stakeholders at a tourism destination. The former study: *Stakeholder Engagement in Destination Management: A Systematic Review of Literature* was purely theoretical where existing knowledge in the field of stakeholder

engagement was reviewed, which was in an attempt to inform dialogue and broaden awareness of best practice in stakeholder engagement within tourism destinations. Their review resulted in the creation of a composite model, which was then redesigned in the latter (2015) study. The model displays the elements that according to them should be considered when seeking to engage tourism stakeholders in collaborative destination management, and will be presented in detail below:

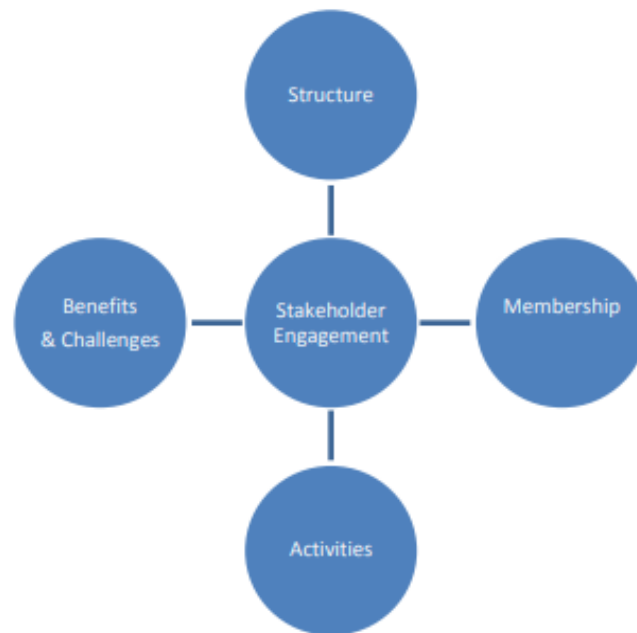


Figure 1 Factors impacting stakeholder engagement (Lally, O'Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 3).

Structuring Stakeholder Engagement

Structuring Stakeholder Engagement was considered to impact the effectiveness of engagement activities, destination competitiveness and boost the collaborative union of stakeholders. Co-ordinating the relationship of the diverse stakeholders is essential as well, since that can affect the stakeholder's choice whether to participate in the collaboration or not. Leadership is particularly vital for structuring the stakeholder engagement since it is essential that the stakeholders understand their roles and responsibility within the shared destination governance (Thomson, Perry & Miller, 2007). In order to successfully motivate the stakeholders then the leadership must embody high levels of persistence, vision and courage (Sloan, 2009). Furthermore, a shared identity amongst the stakeholders is considered fundamental in order to ensure a collective representation of the destination

and amongst the stakeholders (Lemmettyinen & Go, 2008). Horlings (2012) highlights the importance of high levels of social skills and public diplomacy rather than solely technical expertise for successful engagement amongst stakeholders in a destination context. Network density was also found to have an impact on the formation of collaborative unions amongst the stakeholders, the more dense their network was, the stronger the alliance, whilst on the contrary, a weaker network density results in a more conflicting behaviour which reduces the chances of collaboration (Rowley, 1997).

Benefits & Challenges in stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder collaboration was considered to be greatly beneficial for destinations and the individual organizations that operate at the destination level. It allows them to benefit directly through the shared resources and knowledge that the collaboration can bring about (Savage et al., 2010). Collaboration has also been considered very favourable for local government and the public sector since it has been shown to decrease conflicts amongst stakeholders, promote and increase the understanding of the benefits that tourism can bring about, legitimize political decision making, coordinate action and result in more sustainable outcomes for the region (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

There are also many challenges that can impede stakeholder engagement. Wang (2008) listed up a few factors that have been linked to impede engagement, such as: Lack of time and staff, and a perceived absence of information. Shortall (1994) stressed the fact that DMOs should be aware of the potential problem of involving a lot of stakeholders while only representing a few. Huxham & Vangen, (2000) stressed that fast pace of change in the tourism sector can cause different memberships of different stakeholders to change along with their purpose and goals, and this complexity factor can indeed affect their engagement level. According to Koschmann, Kuhn & Pfarrer (2012) DMOs are often lacking in resources, infrastructure, and managerial capacity, which all are needed in order to coordinate the efforts. It is also essential to ensure that the members within the stakeholder group are actually representing the over all stakeholders, since group membership can in some cases cause resistance and/or dissatisfaction, which then can impede engagement (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

However, some of the challenges in stakeholder engagement are simply not in the power of the DMOs to manage. The desires and motives of the different stakeholders do

not all conform in the same way (Bhat & Guar, 2012). Each stakeholder will have a different tension and relationship with the collective interest of the destination. The stakeholders can vary a lot, from being very proactively engaged to simply wanting to remain passive (Thomson, Perry & Miller, 2007). Wang (2008) further points out that the positive impact of co-operation within the destination often benefits everyone at the destination, even those that have not been involved in the collaboration. This factor might discourage participation and stakeholders might decide not to collaborate as a protest to the free-riding of others. Dredge (2006) pointed out the importance of considering the balance between the passive community and the engaged stakeholders in relation to the destination networks, as an imbalance there might cause difficulties.

Activities in stakeholder engagement

DMOs have a vital role in stakeholder engagement activities at a destination since it is their policies and practices that directly influence the level of participation amongst the stakeholders at the destination. As previously mentioned in this paper, stakeholder engagement can be defined as “the practices an organization undertakes to involve stakeholders” (Greenwood, 2007, as cited in Lally, O’Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 5). The process of stakeholder engagement activities can be divided into two activities, one is the process of attracting stakeholders and the other has to do with keeping them engaged (Tuominen, 1995 as cited in Lally, O’Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 4). One of the most fundamental elements in stakeholder engagement is communication (Koschmann, Kuhn & Pfarrer, 2012). Intense and frequent communication allows for relationship development that is important for the stakeholder engagement process (Plaza-Ubeda, De Burgos-Jimenez, & Carmona-Moreno, 2010). The technological advances of the internet and the development of social media aids DMOs in establishing “real-time interactive relationships between collaborating stakeholders within the destination” (Svendson & Laberge, 2005; Bhat & Guar, 2012, as cited in Lally, O’Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 5). Bayley & French (2008) highlight the importance of utilising multiple engagement instruments depending on the differing objectives in terms of cohesion levels, information sharing, practicality, democratic issues, suitability, and any preferences that directly relate to the decision speed or quality. According to Byrd (2007), the recipe for successful stakeholder engagement relies on adequate levels of resources, time and leadership. When one or more of those

factors are lacking, then stakeholder engagement decreases. Sloan (2009) states that engagement practices should help collect information about the expectations and interests of the stakeholders within the destination, which as a result helps facilitate mutual learning and adaptive behaviour within the destinations.

Membership in stakeholder engagement

Involving multiple stakeholders in a collaborative endeavour at a destination is by no means a straight forward activity. There are a number of elements that need to be considered, such as power relations, norms of behaviour, membership, and decision making. These types of collaborative initiatives need to involve a certain volume and mix of sectoral statuses and capacities to ensure representativeness (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). There is some balancing needed between requiring a sufficient number of members to mobilise activities, but at the same time ensuring that the number of members do not exceed the co-ordination and communication capabilities of the DMO. The essential elements that have been linked to motivate and influence stakeholder interactions have to do with the commitment of stakeholders to one another and to the DMO. Furthermore it is affected by communication, learning, reciprocity, trust, relationship orientation, and power (Polonsky, Schuppisser & Beldona, 2002).

There is also a need to ensure a certain level of stakeholder diversity, as stakeholders that share common characteristics can help increase common values, enhance stakeholder satisfaction, engagement and commitment (Garriga, 2010). There is however also evidence that suggest that a homogenous stakeholder group at a destination can result in unintentional inertness (Minoja, Zolla & Coda, 2010). Ensuring diversity levels amongst destination stakeholders is therefore recommended to establish positive tension amongst the stakeholders. Another issue to keep in mind is that collaboration at a destination is not equally set up, it is often the powerful stakeholders who set the tone and it is not possible to say that the partnerships are necessarily equal (Greenwood, 2007). The scope and influence that different levels of power, be them perceived or real, has a considerable impact on collaboration amongst stakeholders (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

Further development of model

This rounds up the presentation of the above model, however Quinlan, Lally and O'Donovan (2013) point out that further research in the form of context specific qualitative research would be highly beneficial for acquiring deeper understanding of the phenomenon that is stakeholder engagement.

Lally, O'Donovan and Quinlan (2015) followed up on the previous 2013 study and conducted a comparative case study in the areas of Waterford, Ennis and Carlow in Ireland, where they continued to explore key success factors in stakeholder engagement. Their findings did in many ways reflect the same elements that had been developed from the literature review in the 2013 study. One of their main conclusion was however the fact that there is no, one method fits all, when it comes to stakeholder engagement, but rather that “engagement strategies must always be tailored to the specific requirements of the destination, the stakeholder community and the nature of the destination objectives” (Lally, O'Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 12).

Their findings resulted in a collection of key success factors that they consider to be “antecedents to effective stakeholder engagement” (p. 10):

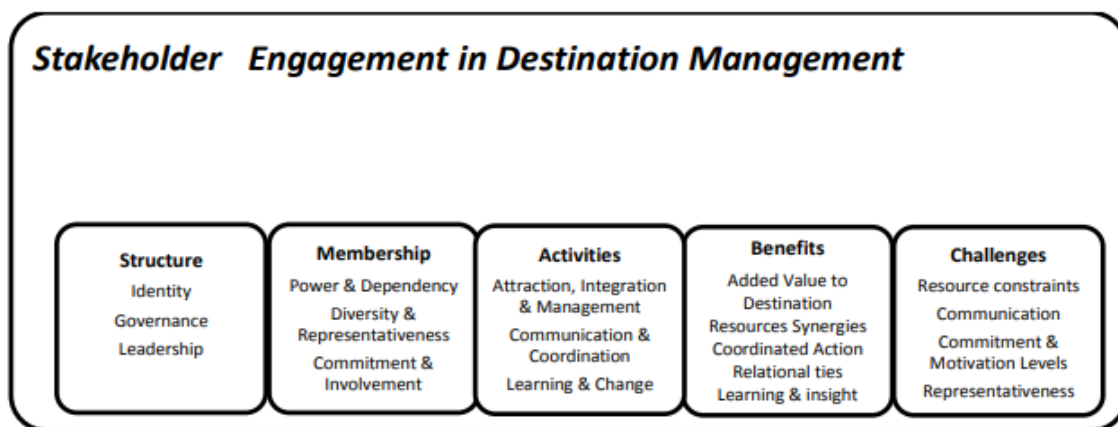


Figure 2: Factors Impacting Stakeholder Engagement (Lally, O'Donovan. & Quinlan, 2015, p. 10)

The main overall factors that are considered to affect stakeholder engagement are essentially the same as the ones that developed out of the literature review from 2013. Lally, O'Donovan & Quinlan (2015) encourage further exploration into the various principles for stakeholder engagement at different case locations. As that kind of research can only add to the body of knowledge in the field (p. 12).

4 Case Introduction

Icelandic Tourism

Tourism in Iceland has been on a rapid rise in the last decades. Tourism was already significant in 2010 with a total number of 488.600 visitors that year (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2017). This number of visitors is quite large considering the fact that Iceland only has a population of 348.450 (Icelandic Statistics, 2018). The number of visitors has already more than tripled in just 6 years, with a staggering number of 1.791.000 visitors in 2016, as the graph below indicates:



Figure 3: (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2017, p. 5)

The increase has been so rapid that it greatly exceeded the predictions of the Icelandic Tourist Board from 2009. The increase of tourism had been about 8,3% in the ten year period leading up to 2009. The predictions were that by 2020 the number of tourists could reach 1.200.000. Furthermore, according to the estimates of the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the increase in visitors to Iceland should be around 760.000 in 2020 (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2009). The increase in tourists coming to Iceland has however been so extensive that the estimated numbers for 2020 were being exceeded by far as early as 2016.

Jobs in tourism have also increased significantly over the years. In 2006 tourism jobs constituted about 7,2% of jobs in Iceland. In 2017 that number had increased to 14,5%.

When put into context with the rest of the world then the statistical growth of tourism jobs in Iceland in 2016 was the 6th highest in the world. Tourism has furthermore become one of the main industries in Iceland by 2018 (Íslandsbanki, 2018).

One of the main challenges in Icelandic tourism has been and still is, evening out seasonal fluctuations and distributing tourists more evenly throughout the country. The majority of tourists come into the country through the main international Airport in Keflavík, which is located close to the capital city of Reykjavík. Most of the tourists visit during the summer season and they mostly stay around the capital area and the South Coast of Iceland. The problem that this creates is that most of the popular places in the South of Iceland are overcrowded during the high season. This results in the fragile nature in these areas to have reached its limits. Places that receive a lot of tourists during the summer often receive too few during the winter season and therefore struggle with making tourism their primary occupation throughout the whole year (Promote Iceland, B).

The overall marketing, promotion and branding of Iceland is in the hands of Iceland's national DMO, Promote Iceland. Their branding campaigns have received worldwide attention and have been awarded multiple international rewards (Promote Iceland, D). Iceland gained worldwide attention in 2010 when the volcano Eyjafjallajökull famously erupted and caused the biggest air travel disruption ever documented worldwide. Stakeholders in Icelandic tourism were desperate when cancellations started pouring in for the upcoming tourist season. This could have had immense consequences for the Icelandic economy with the ever growing investment in tourism, as well as a high number of people relying on tourism as their main occupation, after the financial crash of 2008. The stakeholders united and launched a branding campaign under the name Inspired by Iceland, where everybody in Iceland united on social media to send a strong message out to the world. The message was that Iceland was still a great place to visit and that the volcanic eruption did not negatively affect the destination Iceland (Promote Iceland, 2011).

In 2011 a project was launched in Iceland with the aim to help fight the seasonal fluctuations and the imbalanced distribution of tourists. The project was called *Ísland allt árið*, which means Iceland all year round. The tourism stakeholders continued to collaborate in a similar way that they had done within the Inspired by Iceland campaign, and they decided to use that slogan as their umbrella branding concept (Promote Iceland, A). The project is still ongoing, with yearly meetings where the aim and design are adjusted to the

current needs and visions of the stakeholders. This includes marketing campaigns launched regularly that resonate with the overall vision and objectives of the Icelandic Tourism sector (Promote Iceland, C, Promote Iceland, D). Even though there is still a noticeable difference between high and low season and capital area vs countryside, there has been a significant improvement since 2010. The graph below shows the distribution of tourists according to time of year both in 2010 and then in 2017 for comparison. The graph shows that a higher percentage of tourists are visiting during the winter season than in 2010 (Íslandsbanki, 2018, p. 11).

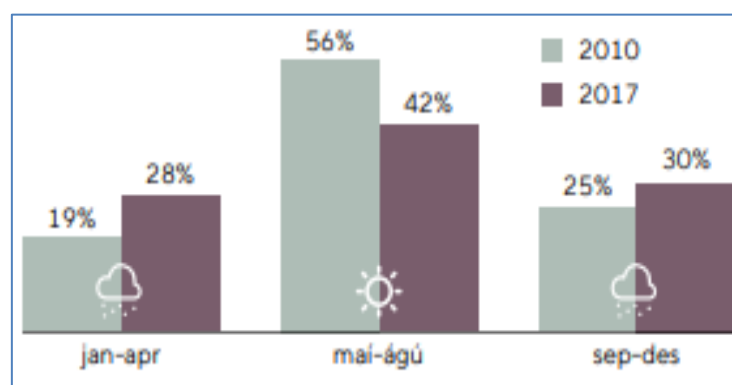


Figure 4: (Íslandsbanki, 2018, p. 11)

The Icelandic government realizes the importance and scope of the continuous development of Tourism in the country:

Tourism has been the principal driving force behind economic growth in Iceland since 2011 and generated 8,000 new jobs in its core sectors. The sustained growth in this industry presents opportunities to enhance prosperity and positive regional development in Iceland (Ministry of Industry and Innovation & SAF, 2015, p. 3).

There is a great emphasis on collaboration between the government and the industry for the future planning of Icelandic tourism. One of the challenges lies in the complexity of the tourism system which is very complicated to navigate since there are so many different people from various sectors that are all connected to tourism in one way or the other. One of the most challenging parts of organizing tourism development has to do with the sheer number of people involved. This can lead to a very complicated legal

framework, since all of the different government ministries are involved. It is quite challenging to harmonise the work being carried out by ministries, institutions and interest groups. The organization of the sector is often quite unclear and that makes responsibilities unclear as well. There are multiple parties involved with every step of tourism planning, funding, promotional activities and more factors. Promotional activities are just a small part of this system and there are many different actors involved with promotional activities within Iceland (Ministry of Industry and Innovation & SAF, 2015).

The regions within Iceland

The Icelandic Association of Local Authorities divides Iceland into eight regions. East, South, Southwest, Capital region, West, Westfjords, Northwest and North East.



Figure 5: (Regional Marketing offices of Iceland)

For regional marketing purposes the area of Iceland is divided into 7 regions (Regional Marketing offices of Iceland). The division is almost the same as the one presented by The Icelandic Association of Local Authorities. The main difference however lies in the division of the North area,

which for regional marketing purposes is represented as one large area, but is otherwise commonly considered to be two separate regions, the North West and the North East. Each of the regions, apart from the capital area of Reykjavik, have their own regional marketing office. The seven regions and their location within Iceland are displayed below:

Visit North Iceland

The area defined as North Iceland by the Regional Marketing Offices, covers 36.530 km², making it the largest of the seven regions. Visit North Iceland is the regional marketing office for North Iceland and their main function is to coordinate the promotion and marketing, directed at both domestic and international tourists.

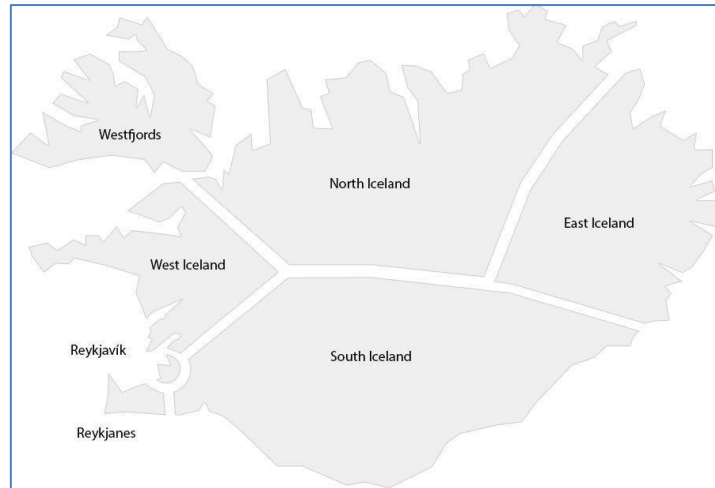


Figure 6: (Visit North Iceland, A)

There are in total 20 municipalities in the region of North Iceland (Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, 2018) and 19 of those are members of Visit North Iceland. The members of Visit North Iceland consist of roughly 216 companies. The inhabitants in the area were estimated to be 36.530 in 2016 and the greatest distance within the region is 496 km from Borðeyri to Bakkafjörður (Visit North Iceland, F). The region has 28 densely populated areas which are displayed below:

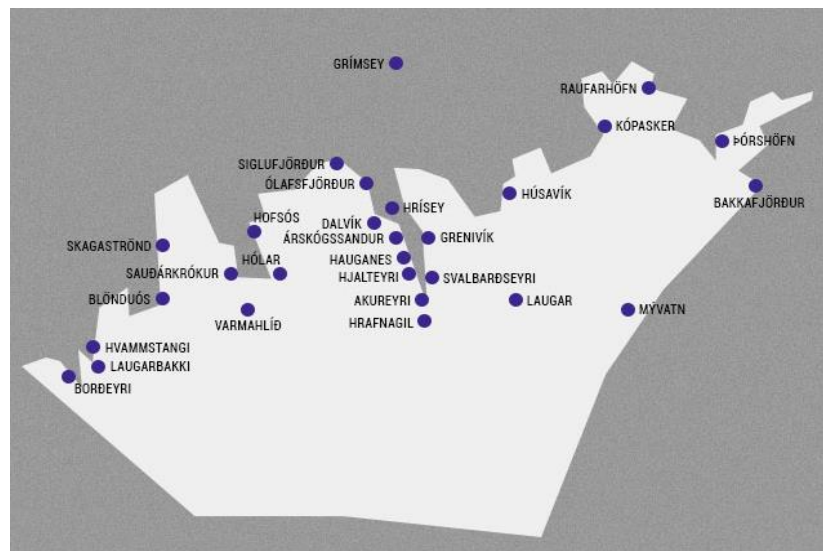


Figure 7: (Visit North Iceland, A)

The marketing office, Visit North Iceland, was founded in 2003 and was initially run as a private limited-liability company in an equal ownership of the tourism association of

Northwest and the tourism association of North East. In 2011 the marketing office went through some changes and was made into a private non-profit organization. It is run by a 5 person's committee, with each member being a representative of a tourism company that is a member of Visit North Iceland. The committee is elected by the tourism company members. There are currently six people officially employed at Visit North Iceland marketing office. The income of Visit North Iceland comes mainly from the 19 municipalities that are members, from all of the companies that pay membership fees, from the Icelandic Tourism board, and then from other government funding. The brand image of North Iceland was developed at a workshop in 2011 with various stakeholders from the North Iceland region and from other parts of Iceland. The brand image consists of three words which are; Tranquillity, Power and Magic (Visit North Iceland, E).

The main objectives of Visit North Iceland are clearly listed on their website as being the following (Visit North Iceland, G):

1. "To develop and strengthen the image of North Iceland as a tourist destination"
2. "To work with tourism companies and tourist representatives in North Iceland"
3. "To cooperate with tourist information centres and coordinate information provided to tourists"
4. "To help stakeholders to assemble, coordinate and market innovation and events within the region, also research target groups and assist in marketing"
5. "To encourage innovation in tourism in the region, providing assistance and advice"
6. "Provide training and workshops for managers and staff in various areas of marketing and product development"
7. "Marketing and promotion of North Iceland via the web and social media, by publications and participation in workshops, exhibitions and marketing projects domestically and abroad"
8. "To participate in ongoing development projects for tourism in North Iceland"

There has been a great emphasis on attracting tourists to North Iceland during the low season as well as in general. Visit North Iceland has a big role in that development, being the primary DMO for the region. Their work towards these aims is often carried out through various projects, and there are currently a few projects ongoing that were mentioned during the interviews in the data collection phase of this project. Some projects,

worth mentioning are, *The Arctic Coast Way* project, *The Air 66 North Airline Cluster*, *Ski Iceland* and the establishment of direct flights to Akureyri during the winter time with the British travel agency, SuperBreak.

The Arctic Coast Way is essentially a route along the coast way all the way from Hvammstangi in the North West to Bakkafjörður in the Northeast corner. The route is in total around 800 km long and will pass by 21 small towns, belonging to 17 different municipalities. All of the towns can unite under the umbrella brand of *The Arctic Coast Way* and the aim is to create a worthy attraction for tourists within the North Iceland region. This will also help move the main tourist traffic away from the most popular sights in the North that are already swamped with tourists during the high season. Furthermore, it will help highlight attractions in the peripheral areas along the coast way, which will increase the involvement of those communities in tourism. The project is in full swing and the route is scheduled to open officially during the Vestnorden conference that will be held in Akureyri in the fall of 2018 (Visit North Iceland, H).

The Air 66 North Airline Cluster is a collaboration between various companies, institutions, municipalities and other stakeholders in the area that will benefit from establishing better flight connections to Akureyri Airport. The main purpose is to promote Akureyri Airport as a new year round international destination, with the goal of increasing the number of tourists in the North Iceland and encourage longer stays in the region. It was launched in 2011 and its management is in the hands of Visit North Iceland.

A major goal was achieved in the year of 2018 when SuperBreak, a British travel agency, operated direct tours from various airports in the UK directly to Akureyri Airport during the winter months from January to April. There were some initial difficulties during those trips, which were due to bad weather condition and lack of training by the airline employed by travel agency. There were however positive news revealed during an *Air 66 North Airline Cluster* conference in May 2018, where SuperBreak revealed plans to continue the direct trips to Akureyri during the winter season, which included plenty of promising improvements with regards to choice of airline and better preparation (Spring conference, 2018).

Ski Iceland is another collaborative venture in the North of Iceland. Most of the skiing areas in Iceland are located in the north region. The ski areas have joined forces and now conduct their marketing under the umbrella brand of *Ski Iceland*; this is meant to

attract greater attention internationally, highlighting North Iceland as a winter skiing destination. Visit North Iceland promotes this collaboration on their official website, offering a package deal designed around the concept which is called 5x5, which stands for 5 days in 5 skiing areas (Visit North Iceland, I).

Visit North Iceland along with all the other regional marketing offices around Iceland are all currently working on a destination management plan (DMP), which is the biggest project so far in the Icelandic tourism sector. The project is organized by the Icelandic Tourism Board, the Icelandic Travel Industry Association, and the Ministry of Industry and Innovation. Visit North Iceland manages the project for the North Iceland region and the stakeholders in the project are mainly the tourism companies along with the many municipalities in the region. The main aim of the DMP work is to ensure a responsible development of tourism in harmony with the environment, citizens, tourists and companies. The project was launched in 2017 and is therefore still in its early stages. Given the size of the region, the project managers decided to split the region up into four different areas. The four areas are divided in the following way (Visit North Iceland, J):



Figure 8: (Visit North Iceland, J)

1. East and West Húnavatnssýsla.
2. Skagafjörður and Eyjafjörður, including Tröllaskagi.
3. Mývatn - Húsavík -
Píngeyjarsveit often referred to as the diamond circle.
4. The area of Norðurhjarí.

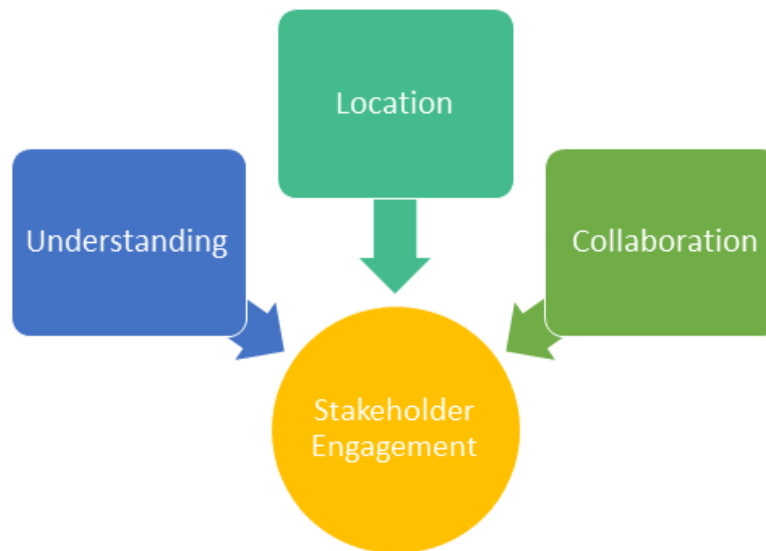
The main purpose of the DMP project is to gain better overview of the current situation within each area, as well as examining the target group within each area. Furthermore, the purpose is to understand the current situation in relation to existing infrastructure and current projects happening in each area, as well as looking at potential development projects suited to the various stakeholders there. Key marketing messages are

also examined within each area in order to develop the main marketing message of North Iceland, as well as encouraging collaboration in relation to marketing (Visit North Iceland, J).

The work of Visit North Iceland is increasing. Their main purpose was originally aimed at coordinating the marketing efforts of North Iceland as a whole, but now they are also involved with managing various development projects, as well as managing a DMP project for the region. It is quite evident that they in fact are a destination management organization (DMO) for the area and play an important role in the branding of North Iceland. Björn, a project manager at Visit North Iceland, who is responsible for the DMP project, stated in an interview, that even though there has never been any official mentioning of Visit North Iceland as a DMO, they could certainly claim to be one, based on their work in recent years (Björn H. Reynisson, 2018).

5 Findings

The data analysis from the 15 qualitative interviews with the tourism companies in North Iceland resulted in the development of three over all themes that all were found to impact stakeholder engagement amongst the tourism companies in North Iceland. They are presented in the figure below:



The themes provide an organizing structure for the following analysis chapters. The findings of each theme will be outlined and then followed by a small discussion chapter. This will then be tied together in the final conclusion.

5.1 Understanding

The first theme presented in the analysis of the data is *Understanding*. *Understanding* became an obvious theme, early in the coding process, as a lot of the processes involved in the running of a tourism business, collaboration between tourism businesses, as well as the branding of an area was interpreted and acted out in various ways amongst the interviewees. Through the process of analysing the interview data further, four subcategories presented themselves. Those categories are convenient in order to structure and organize the analysis chapter of this theme. They are: *Dissemination of information as a prerequisite for understanding*, *Understanding the need to take initiative*, *Understanding the benefits of collaboration*, and *Understanding the benefits of regional branding*.

Dissemination of information as a prerequisite for understanding

Information is a key component in all of the categories within the theme of *Understanding*. In the interviews, the notion of understanding is usually directly related to the level and flow of information. When asked about the best way to engage stakeholders, Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, feels that clear communication and information about what and why things are happening is essential to engage people.

The problem that a lot of us face, I think, is that stakeholder engagement is actually just disseminating information. Just let the people know what is happening and why it is happening. Because everybody has their own stuff that they are interested in and their own kind of thing. So getting through to people (Sigurður, Appendix D, pp. 12-13).

He further points out that stakeholders include a wide group of people since, essentially:

Everybody is in tourism. So then when you are talking about stakeholder engagement, because you are trying to get everybody to the table. You start getting the car mechanic to come on and be involved or grocery shop or whatever. That's not smart, it's not actually clever to get everybody involved (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 12).

In his opinion communicating the right information about what is going on and why, will trigger the engagement with the relevant stakeholders. This can help them come to an understanding of how it directly affects them. He feels that this is more effective than trying to involve everyone in the area that have something to do with tourism, which essentially is everyone (Sigurður, Appendix D).

How information can affect people's attitudes in relation to participation in branding was observed during the interview with Interviewee B, from the anonymous café in Siglufjörður. When asked to participate in the project, she initially did not feel that her business was directly involved in tourism. After a few questions about the business she

agreed to participate in the project. It was during the interview that she started to realise that she could in fact regard herself as being a tourism business, since a considerable part of her customers are tourists. Since she is quite new in the business, she had not given much thought about the general tourism development in the area, nor is she particularly familiar with the workings of Visit North Iceland. She did however quickly show interest and willingness to get more involved in these matters as the interview went on (Interviewee B, Appendix I). This also relates to the influence of disseminating information as Sigurður from the Seal Center had mentioned. He connected engagement levels with the understanding of how and why things directly impact people's own businesses. In that regard, Interviewee B was increasingly enthusiastic about the branding of North Iceland as her understanding of how it impacts her own business started growing (Interviewee B, Appendix I).

Ragnar, owner of Mývatn Activity, feels that it is important to inform people of the benefits of being involved in collaboration in order for them to start participating. He himself credits his high level of engagement and involvement in tourism in North Iceland to the effect it has on the profitability of his business. Effectively it saves him money on marketing for his company.

Well first and foremost it saves you money. To be involved in it. Marketing can be greatly expensive. And I think it also helps when an area is marketing itself, and shows the complete picture of what it has to offer... Everybody will profit from that, and you will use much, much less money doing it. (Ragnar, Appendix K, p. 79)

He feels that the same factors that motivate him can be communicated with other people, as their understanding of the benefits of collaboration might encourage their participation and heighten their engagement levels.

Interviewee D, employee at Mývatn Nature Baths, also feels that increased information and communication through meetings is beneficial for increasing participation in the branding efforts of North Iceland (Interviewee D, Appendix L).

Understanding the need to take initiative

Understanding the need to take initiative pertains to understanding how to be informed as well as understanding of where the responsibility for being informed lies.

Furthermore, this category deals with the general importance of taking initiative in matters pertaining to the success of one's own tourism company.

Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, points out that there is a disconnect between people wanting to participate and then people actually making the effort of participating. He references a survey that was done in his area, where residents of the area generally felt that they wanted to be more involved in tourism planning and decisions, relating to local tourism development. "People complain that their voice isn't heard, and tourism just does its own thing without involving them" (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 13). Soon after the survey was carried out amongst the residents of the area, he had an open meeting where such an agenda was discussed, and to his surprise only one person that attended was not directly involved in tourism. This was surprising to him since the survey suggested that 70% of residents did want to participate more actively. Therefore according to those findings, the meeting should have been better attended by the general public in the area. Sigurður points out that people often lack initiative to take responsibility to actually participate when the opportunity is given.

So the level that people say that they want to be engaged and the level that they actually do engage, when it involves leaving the house, right? And having a say in something other than their own echo chamber, it is very difficult. And I think it's getting more and more difficult anywhere in the world as society changes. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 13)

He further points out that the task of communicating efficiently is generally seen as a big challenge.

I don't think anybody actually likes to read a report, nobody cares. So you are trying to deal with people in headlines, because everybody just reads the headline and doesn't go any further than that. So that's the kind of difficulty. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 13)

This relates directly to a view that was common amongst the interviewees that suggest that people need to take more responsibility of their own participation in tourism.

Sigurður feels that distances play a big role in engagement. “Getting people to come to a meeting is hard enough, if they have to drive for two hours to get to it as well then it's definitely kind of tricky” (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 14). Furthermore, it is very easy for smaller tourism businesses to get lost in their own business. “I think, if you are running a medium sized guest house, I think it's very easy to not be engaged at all” (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 14).

On a similar note, Interviewee A, from Húnaþing Vestra, talks about how she does not put emphasis on initiating collaboration with Visit North Iceland herself. When asked how the collaboration could be improved she says:

Maybe it's because everybody is kind of stuck in their own business, like trying to, I don't know, like serve breakfast and answer emails. So they kind of get lost in it. Now I get emails from them regularly. I do read them. And they have news posts. I don't know how they could do it better. It's just each in their own corner, each to their own. (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 36)

Interviewee A has until now not been actively seeking out information, and does not feel that there is a clear branding strategy for the North of Iceland. She feels that the branding has not been introduced to her and no guidelines are visible.

I don't feel like that they have put down some marketing strategy for us. Or that they have introduced a brand to us. Or that they have introduced something to us that we should be using. I don't feel like there is any guideline. People are using trademarks, like what are your nearest nature attractions, stuff like that. North, snow, horses, skiing, something like that. But nobody has really been telling me what to do. (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 36)

Auður, owner of Infinity Blue, stresses the importance of self-reliance and showing initiative when it comes to reaping the benefits of the work that Visit Iceland does. She stresses the fact that Visit North Iceland is undermanned and do not necessarily have the time to be constantly contacting the companies to get them to participate. “You sort of need to go look for it yourself. Not just signing up to Visit North Iceland and then just wait

for them to do something for you” (Auður, Appendix H, p. 57). She feels that companies need to take initiative and establish good communication with Visit North Iceland, and that they are more than willing to help in any way possible, but being as busy as they are, each company needs to take responsibility of their own participation.

Three people have no time to service 200 companies so you have to get it yourself. Like "Hi, my name is Auður and I have this floating activity in Hofsfós". You have to connect with them... They just can't be calling every company that starts a tourism business. You have to reach them and then maybe they come to you (Auður, Appendix H, p. 57).

Auður understands how participating is beneficial for her. She also takes an active initiative in contacting and communicating with Visit North Iceland and therefore makes sure that she benefits in every way possible from this collaboration. She points out that some companies feel that the membership fee is too expensive and that Visit North Iceland does not do anything for them. Auður thinks that they might not understand the exact benefits, and implies that people just have to contact them to benefit from the participation. “Many companies think that it is expensive, because they think that it is not doing anything for them. I think that you just have to send them an email regularly” (Auður, Appendix H, p. 58).

Understanding the benefits of collaboration

Interviewee B, from the café in Siglufjörður, exhibits a good understanding of the impact collaboration can have on her business. When asked if she recognized people visiting her that had visited ‘Ski Iceland’, she says that she feels there is a good connection between the concepts: “It’s more this winter than last winter. So it is growing. And I’m sure it will grow even more if I market this as a place to stop by after skiing” (Interviewee B, Appendix I, p. 63). Interviewee B talks about how she is starting to collaborate more with the people in the area. She describes how the collaboration is increasing, as she learns more about the benefits, and is starting to structure and plan the collaboration more carefully for the upcoming summer.

Interviewee C, employee at North Sailing, considers collaboration and regional branding to be very important for North Iceland. She thinks it is very important that North Iceland is promoted as one area in order to get people to come up to North Iceland and not just linger around the most known tourist attractions in South Iceland.

People often say that you don't get the full picture of Iceland just by going to the capital or going on the Golden Circle or whatever. Going to other places in Iceland is very important to get the full picture of how the country is, and the culture and everything. So it is very important that we promote North Iceland. (Interviewee C, Appendix J, pp. 71-72)

Interviewee C realises the many benefits of collaborating with Visit North Iceland in the branding of North Iceland.

We only have operation in the North of Iceland, like North Sailing whale watching industry. We operate here in Húsavík and then in Hjalteyri. So of course promoting Eyjafjörður is also a good thing for us, since we are operating from a place in Eyjafjörður, so it absolutely affects our operation. And we are definitely keen on working with Visit North Iceland in promoting North Iceland even more. (Interviewee C, Appendix J, p. 72)

Ragnar, owner of Mývatn Activity, likewise understands the importance of collaboration within the destination. "I think it is very important that everybody works together. Everybody will profit from that. So it is the best way to do it, I think" (Ragnar, Appendix K, p. 76). Heba, owner of the restaurants Strikið and Bryggjan, likewise feels that collaboration throughout the entire region of North Iceland is important "I think its best that we all work together. Not just Akureyri, but the whole North" (Heba, Appendix O, p. 107).

Auður, owner Infinity Blue, talks about a lack of understanding amongst the tourism companies in her area towards the benefit of collaboration. She gives an example of a hotel manager in a nearby village who tried to initiate a collaboration circle, connecting the guests of his establishment to the nearby area through a publication of a brochure.

He was trying to get the companies aboard with financing the brochure, but people were not really into paying for the brochure. So he decided to make the brochure anyway, so he has a very nice brochure where for example the Hofsó's swimming pool is in. Now he is doing a new brochure and wants to display the floating activity, because that for example makes his accommodation place more juicy. (Auður, Appendix H, p. 54)

Auður felt that people didn't really understand the direct benefit that this brochure could have on their businesses.

When people can see the different options available in the area, like skiing, restaurants and swimming pools, as opposed to being just alone in your own corner trying to sell accommodation, or for example me trying to be alone selling floating experience. (Auður, Appendix H, p. 54)

The manager of the hotel and Auður ventured further into collaboration, and he included her activity in his hotel package deal.

While now there is an accommodation place willing to include my floating activity in a certain accommodation package deal. Because for example if you are trying to sell accommodation for maybe like 20-30.000 ISK or something like that, then it really doesn't change so much to add a little bit, like maybe 3500 ISK, and suddenly you have a juicy accommodation package. So the floating can be included, so that is why it has a lot to do with collaboration as opposed to trying to be alone in this. (Auður, Appendix H, p. 54)

Viggo, manager of Tindastóll ski area, likewise feels that people often do not seem to understand the direct benefits of collaboration in his near area. He names for example:

We have winter games in the ski area here. And I was talking to all the companies here, so that we can market. But they do not have an interest in staying with me and

pay for the marketing, so that we get more people here. I think it is a problem (Viggo, Appendix G, p. 47).

Viggo understands the full potential that the ski area has for the local region, in relation to boosting business for other tourism companies during the low season.

I have talked with them and said, we have to work with the ski area and that's our reason to have all of the rooms in the area here, in the Northwest. I mean that's in the winter. But they are not thinking about that. They are just thinking: "what can we do?" (Viggo, Appendix G, p. 48)

Understanding the benefits of regional branding

This subcategory deals with the understanding of how the branding work of Visit North Iceland benefits the tourism businesses. To understand benefits of regional branding, the understanding of branding as a tool is a prerequisite. Some of the tourism businesses are however not completely familiar with what branding really is, and what regional branding does. When asked about whether they identify with the brand image of North Iceland, many of the interviewees seem to view the identification in a geographical sense. Meaning that they identify with the brand image, solely by being a part of the geographical area of North Iceland. There is not always a clear understanding of what the North Iceland brand is.

Viggo, manager of Tindastóll ski area, seems to have a good understanding of what branding is but feels that North Iceland lacks a clear image and brand. He feels that the North Iceland brand is just a collection of different attractions and activities on offer in the region. When asked whether he was familiar with the North Iceland brand and what was being marketed under that brand he replied: "No I think not. I mean, there are a lot of attractions like Mývatn and whale watching in Húsavík, Drangey in Skagafjörður and so on. And they are attractions that are marketed for the North part of Iceland" (Viggo, Appendix G, p. 45).

Viggo likewise has a good understanding of how regional branding projects can benefit him and other tourism businesses. Through his collaboration project of *Ski Iceland* he has first-hand experience in operating with an umbrella branding concept. He

understands the many levels of marketing that goes on, and stresses that his international marketing is conducted under the *Ski Iceland* brand, which helps make a bigger impact and communicate more effectively. He points out that the local marketing he does of his ski area, is more directed to the local area.

Interviewee C, employee at North Sailing, shows understanding of the different layers of marketing like Viggo from Tindastóll ski area does. She realizes that the North Iceland brand is an umbrella brand over the whole North Iceland region, which collectively represents the area externally. Meanwhile the individual company still has a certain marketing image of their own, aimed directly at their customers in the internal area.

We always want to have our own marketing material and our own image, like how we use marketing. But I think it is also very important that we have something similar going on... For example when we are attending shows and everything, it is important that we are using a similar brand just to promote Iceland itself (Interviewee C, Appendix J, p. 72).

Auður, owner of Infinity Blue, has a good understanding of how her business benefits from participating in the work that Visit North Iceland does. She understands that by participating in their work, she gets exposure on the international stage which is something she could not afford to engage in on her own, given the size of her business. She feels that she relies somewhat on the work of Visit North Iceland. “Yes I pay a yearly fee to Visit North Iceland and they really do the work for me.” (Auður, Appendix H, p. 55).

Interviewee D, employee at Mývatn Nature Baths, feels that collaboration is essential in the branding of North Iceland “We can't only market one place, we need to market all of the Northern region together” (Interviewee D, Appendix L, p. 87). She understands the benefits of branding North Iceland as a region in the sense, that people of course, come to an area not just for a particular attraction. She feels that the collaboration in the region is vital to attract people to the area, since they are essentially looking for an experience that is made up by multiple actors. Her company benefits by other attractions as well. Tourists might be interested in going to North Iceland for a particular attraction, but once they are there, they will inevitably visit other attractions in the area as well as use different types of services provided by other companies.

We want people to come to North Iceland, because you can see all kinds of stuff here as well. And if you go maybe to Húsavík, it is half an hour drive to Mývatn. So if we want people here, we want them to come to North Iceland. Also, people are not just coming for the Mývatn Nature Baths, they need to have some other things to do and see (Interviewee D, Appendix L, p. 92).

Guðmundur, manager of Hlíðarfjall ski area, also had a very good understanding of place branding processes. When asked about how he felt about North Iceland being promoted as one place he was very positive towards it and felt that:

It makes the region come out as one name, one brand. And it gives whomever is out there in Britain or Denmark or Sweden, that you know there is something in North Iceland. Versus if you market just Dalvík or Bakkafjörður separately. It gives us a strong identity (Guðmundur, Appendix M, p. 95).

Bergþór, Head of Marketing at SBA, likewise had a good understanding of regional branding and references the Toscana region in Italy as an analogy.

It's similar to when we were working there together, and we were sometimes thinking about Toscana in Italy for example. Many people know Toscana, and nothing else about Italy. Or more or less you know. And we were thinking, why not North Iceland as a similar part. Of course it's more country and not the same as Italy, but I think we should do it. Market North Iceland. And for the last maybe one or two years we find that there is a higher interest in the area (Bergþór, Appendix N, p. 101).

Ragnar, owner of Mývatn Activity, exhibits a level of understanding in regards to how place branding essentially works “if a place markets itself as a whole and creates an image and a brand, it will benefit the whole area. Like I was saying earlier; from the hotels down to eh. Basically all the services will profit from it” (Ragnar, Appendix K, p. 78).

Einar, owner of the Northern Lights Hotel, understands how participating in the work that Visit North Iceland does benefits his hotel. The benefits are both through participating in the travel shows with them and also by being a member and having his company represented in their marketing material.

There I have a booth where I can represent my company. I basically get access to that through them. So if I would not have been a member then I would not have had the opportunity to do that. But my marketing is of course a little bit through them, since because of my membership then my business is included in the brochures and marketing material that they issue (Einar, Appendix P, p. 117).

Einar feels that it is important for his company to be a part of the work that Visit North Iceland does, even though he does not completely agree with their marketing strategy “But having said that, I do not necessarily agree 100% with the marketing strategy they have.” (Einar, Appendix P, p. 117).

5.1.1 Discussions on the theme Understanding

Information as the necessity for understanding

The need to effectively disseminate information in order to establish a sense of understanding was found to be a crucial element that impacted stakeholder engagement amongst the tourism companies in North Iceland. Visit North Iceland plays an important role here since it is mostly them that disseminate the information about the branding in North Iceland. The dissemination of information directly impacts the tourism companies’ ability to develop an understanding of why they should be involved in branding North Iceland. Arnheiður, managing director of Visit North Iceland, said during an interview that she acknowledges the fact that many of the tourism companies lack understanding on what branding is. She feels that they are quite active in the work that is going on in the region but “they don't necessarily realize that they are participating in branding” (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 139). It can be a challenge for Visit North Iceland to establish and maintain a steady flow of direct communication with a direct stream of useful information given the fact that they are only six employees and their members are around 216 companies all around a

region, which covers 36.53 km². Arnheiður further points out that there is a systematic problem in the flow of information. This problem was highlighted when she was asked about whether Visit North Iceland initiates contact directly with new companies that venture into tourism in the region. To which she replied:

No the system is not in place. When they start a company, they are supposed to contact the tourist board, which is here upstairs, and register into a database of tourism companies. But the tourist board does not have a system in place where they let people know about the regional marketing offices. So what we have been working on for the past, well since we started in 2012, is to try to get the smaller companies, in order to be known, so that they would find us. Because I don't get an announcement when somebody starts a tourism company. I have to find them, in order to contact. Of course we just listen to what is going on, and then we have good cooperation with tourism officials of the municipalities. We meet them regularly and get updates from them. They can tell us what is going on, etc. But it is not a good system, it really isn't. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 137)

She adds that this system is in fact so flawed that there isn't any way of knowing the exact number of tourism companies operating in North Iceland. Improvements to the system are however being examined as a part of the DMP work that is currently taking place in Iceland.

When considering the limited resources Visit Iceland has in the form of manpower in the main office in Akureyri, it can be quite a challenge to have a physical presence and direct communication with the various companies in the whole region. This lack of manpower and time can result in a perceived lack of information and these elements combined have been found to impede stakeholder engagement (Wang, 2008). Lally et al (2015) did find the flow of information and effective communication to be a crucial element for stakeholder engagement. Tuominen (1995) describes the process of engaging stakeholders as two phases, with the former having to do with attracting stakeholders and the other having to do with maintaining engagement levels amongst stakeholders (as cited in Lally, O'Donovan & Quinlan, 2015). It is therefore equally important to establish communication and flow of information to new potential members as it is to keep the

active members engaged. Arnheiður does mention that the registration system is flawed, and there is a problem in relation to keeping a track of new companies in the region. That is of course a problem, since contacting new companies will increase the likeliness of them participating.

It seems that the flow of information is a major barrier to the engagement levels amongst tourism companies in North Iceland. Koschmann, Kuhn & Pfarrer (2012) describes communication as elemental for stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, the use of modern technological tools to secure “real-time interactive relationships between collaborating stakeholders within the destination” is recommended (Svendson & Laberge, 2005; Bhat & Guar, 2012, as cited in Lally, O’Donovan & Quinlan, 2015, p. 5). The current flow of information is reliant on what might be called old school forms of communication in 2018. Information is currently, mainly accessible through, the Visit North Iceland website, via news emails, as well as printed material. Furthermore there is of course the possibility of contact over the phone or in person. Arnheiður, managing director of Visit North Iceland, talks about how she would like a more modern online communication set up in order to engage a broader group of stakeholders, including the residents of North Iceland, and refers to a system used in Canada.

But the locals they don't show up at meetings, so you can never have the communication with them. There is a system in place for example in Canada that we could use, it's a computer system that could be used to talk to them. But it costs a lot of money, so we are not going to do that. We think about it, we try to read what they say, but it's not complete. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 144)

The lack of resources however makes the purchase of such a system impossible at the moment, which then creates a barrier to the development of more efficient ways of communicating.

Understanding the need to take initiative

Thomas, Perry and Miller (2007) found leadership to be very influential for fostering stakeholder engagement since it helps structure an understanding amongst the stakeholders of their responsibility and role in the destination. The understanding amongst

the interviewees of how branding could affect their businesses was related to how engaged they were in general, as well as their level of participation in collaboration projects. This element was found to be crucial in the setting of North Iceland, given how difficult it is for Visit North Iceland to effectively engage people throughout the region. Some interviewees had already realised that in order to reap the most benefits of participating in the branding process with Visit North Iceland, then it was important to take an initiative and approach them in order to effectively use their services to improve their own business. All of the interviewees that showed a higher level of understanding about the benefits of the branding work were also the ones that pointed out the importance of taking initiative and responsibility for their own participation. One of the interviewees that most notably did not exhibit understanding about the branding process, was consequently also the one that did not seem to take any initiative to get involved. Understanding the direct benefits of branding through effective communication and effective dissemination of information can therefore be a prerequisite for understanding one's role and responsibility in branding.

It can therefore be argued that Visit North Iceland could increase engagement levels amongst the tourism businesses in North Iceland by putting an increased emphasis on improving their communications in order to help people understand why they should engage with them and provide clear guidelines on how they can actively participate. This way the tourism businesses could become more aware of the need for them to actively take charge of the communication and participation with Visit North Iceland.

Understanding the benefits of regional branding and collaboration

There was a general agreement amongst the interviewees about the benefits of collaborating at the destination and participating in the branding process. Not everyone had the same level of understanding about the nature of branding vs marketing. Although many of the interviewees did exhibit extensive knowledge of the practice. Arnheiður, the managing director of Visit North Iceland, stated that she feels that people in the region are generally very active and positive in the branding process. She does however mention that not everyone understands that they are participating in branding:

I think they understand the need for marketing, but not necessarily for branding.

And it's always easier to talk to people about marketing that markets your company,

you see the value in it. If I produce a brochure with a picture of your company in it, I'm doing a good job. But if I'm doing branding, which is more invisible and more long term thinking, it's more difficult to get people to understand and accept that, because you want instant results. So I don't think it's something people think about a lot, they just want to see some action. In the branding work, what we try to do, is to have the branding and have the long term strategy and the work we are doing, but also some visible projects. You know, you see results, to keep people satisfied. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 146-147)

This issue can be related back to lack of information about what branding essentially is. One thing that has been discussed quite a bit in the interviews is the fact that many small companies simply do not have the means to spend a lot of time engaging in extensive processes like branding, when they have just enough time and manpower to focus on their own business. Visit North Iceland is also limited by the number of staff, long distances between different companies that are scattered throughout the region and even if they do focus on educating everyone in the region of the benefits of branding, there is always the issue of companies taking the initiative and receiving the information, processing it properly and ultimately developing an understanding from it. Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, also pointed this fact out when he stated that people do not want to read reports now a days, meaning that the communication of today being so fast and continuous that it is like “trying to deal with people in headlines, because everybody just reads the headline and doesn't go any further than that” (Sigurður Línal Þórisson, Appendix D, p. 13). This again ties back to the previous point on, how Visit North Iceland’s lack of more modern tools for real time communication with the tourism businesses can be seen as a barrier for engagement.

5.2 Location

The next theme presented in the analysis is *Location*. *Location* is a theme that influences a lot of the collaboration and branding practices in North Iceland as well as the underlying possibilities for running a tourism business. The overall theme of *Location* is divided into three subcategories, which are *Akureyri as Centre*, *The Periphery*, and *High and low season*.

Akureyri as Centre

The emphasis of Akureyri and the surrounding areas being the centre focus of North Iceland was a subject that was repeatedly touched upon. The location of the interviewee's businesses did have quite an influence on how they viewed the marketing and development in North Iceland in regards to Akureyri and nearby areas.

Sigurður, manager at the Seal Center, is on the periphery of the North Iceland region. He points out that with the development of direct international flights to Akureyri Airport, then Akureyri is becoming a centre from which daytrip tourism thrives in, much like in Reykjavík.

No tours are going anywhere further than Mývatn. It goes to Mývatn, it goes out to Dalvík, Siglufjörður maybe, and then they come back. So it is basically turning Akureyri into a daytrip hub, like Reykjavík is a daytrip hub. Which is the most boring tourism there is in the entire world, this sort of city break with day trips. And that is what leads directly to all the problems with overcrowding in certain areas. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 8)

Sigríður, director of Glaumbær museum, feels that it is generally good that Visit North Iceland promotes North Iceland as one destination. She points out the fact that visitors that arrive in Reykjavík will most often just stay around that area. She points out that Visit North Iceland tries to get people to come to the North and stay there for a few days. She feels however that this highlights Akureyri as a centre from where people can explore the North from and she sees that as a bit of a problem since the "inhabitants of this area are not all in agreement with putting the finger on Akureyri as the centre. They would like them to spread a little bit" (Sigríður, Appendix F, p. 39).

Ragnar, owner of Mývatn Activity, acknowledges the fact that most people who come up to North Iceland will stay in Akureyri, which is the largest service area in the North. He also points out the importance of the Mývatn area to Akureyri, since most of the experiences and tours on offer in North Iceland are around lake Mývatn. He therefore feels that lake Mývatn area "plays a big part in their stay in North Iceland although they will stay in Akureyri. So I think this area is very important" (Ragnar, Appendix K, p. 77).

Bergþór, marketing director of SBA bus company, thinks that branding North Iceland as one region is overall beneficial for the area. He feels that the new initiative of operating direct flights to Akureyri serves to strengthen North Iceland as a destination. "It's a main thing for us to have a direct flight up here, so that we will be a destination" (Bergþór, Appendix N, p. 102).

Bergþór feels that the reason Akureyri becomes the focus, is simply to cater better to the travellers as there is a greater concentration of hotels and restaurant there that directly benefit the visitors in and around Akureyri. "But they are focusing on Akureyri for the people, for the hotels and for dining. And they want to have them closer to the airport, at least the night before departure" (Bergþór, Appendix N, p. 102). There is also an abundant of attractions, like lake Mývatn area which is very well suited as a day tour excursion from Akureyri. Even though people do want to spread the visitors more and stay in other places, like for example, Siglufjörður there is always a certain fear "about for example weather, and the road from Siglufjörður can be closed due to avalanche" (Bergþór, Appendix N, p. 102).

Bergþór realizes that the people in the peripheral areas might not be as optimistic about direct flights to Akureyri as it might accentuate the status of Akureyri as the centre of the North. But he feels they may lack understanding of how this actually benefits them in the end.

I know with politics, the smaller communities are always looking at Akureyri as a monster. But Akureyri is paying the most money in to Visit North Iceland and have done for many years. But always, because I did a lot of tours with people from abroad, tourist operations and journalists and so on, we always maybe started in Reykjavik, went to Gauksmýri in the west and to Sauðárkrókur and Siglufjörður and the East. We did do it all, but there is always this view that Akureyri is getting most of it. But I think it's wrong. (Bergþór, Appendix N, pp. 102-103)

Sigríður, director at Glaumbær museum, however feels that people in her area do not necessarily benefit from the development of direct international flights to Akureyri as it might mean that people do not drive past her area.

As I hear amongst people, then Visit North Iceland tends to try to get people to Akureyri by plane, of course, it is clever but you need two and a half hours extra to enter this area and Húnavatnssýsla. So we are not really so far away from Reykjavík if you think of it. (Sigríður, Appendix F, p. 39)

Einar, owner of Northern Lights Hotel, feels that the marketing of North Iceland is on the wrong path. He feels that the North is doing the same mistake as the South has done. Which is essentially putting most of the emphasis around Akureyri and neighbouring areas, and leaving the peripheral areas out of the picture.

I feel that the marketing in the South has focused too much on the same places and is always making people come to the same places, and then when Visit North Iceland starts marketing the North they focus a lot just on Akureyri, Mývatn area, or pretty much just Akureyri and surroundings. (Einar, Appendix P, p. 115)

He also made this point clear during a meeting in relation to the direct international flights to Akureyri with the travel agency SuperBreak, by posing the question “Won’t that not just be the same kind of marketing that Visit North Iceland has been criticising in South Iceland?” (Einar, Appendix P, p. 115). Einar does however feel that the direct flights to Akureyri are essentially a positive thing and points out that the increased tourism in Akureyri and surrounding areas will positively affect the rest of the region. His criticism rests mainly on the marketing side of things:

The marketing is too much focused on being next to these places that are the biggest. Like for example SuperBreak that came to Akureyri this winter, they were planning to fly to Akureyri the whole summer but there was no available accommodation in Akureyri at that time, and then they did not want to pursue it. So it is about just bringing the people to Akureyri and then they are just taken on day trips on buses to neighbouring places like, Mývatn and Siglurfjörður for example. So for us in the peripheral areas like Raufarhöfn, we do not really benefit from this. The people who fly to Keflavík, rent a car and drive around the country, benefit me

more. We do not really get a lot of these big tours from travel agencies that drive people around in buses. (Einar, Appendix P, p. 115)

Nick, owner of Bárán restaurant, feels that the emphasis of Visit North Iceland to bring in international guests directly through Akureyri and the cruise ships docking in Akureyri does not benefit the peripheral areas. He points out that this type of tourism only benefits Akureyri and the surroundings, which are located close enough for day tour excursions from Akureyri.

I know a lot of focus has been put on these flights this year that are coming in from Britain. I think that's great, but at the same time these are flights, that are holding about a 150 people. That's not really going to affect our area, unless they are pre-booking and renting a car, and coming here on their own. Or unless we put together mini-bus tours coming up here. Because again, all I usually see, if groups are coming into Akureyri or cruise ships, then of course you see the ten big buses going to Mývatn and it's all the same. (Nick, Appendix R, pp. 133-134)

Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, feels that the resources get pooled around Akureyri. This means that the improvement of infrastructures does not get much attention in the peripheral areas. This relates heavily to the fact that most of the larger tourism companies in North Iceland are all located in Akureyri or around that area. They are also partners with Visit North Iceland and are able to provide most of the funding, so it is only natural that the infrastructures in that area receive the highest priority.

I think Visit North Iceland does a great job with limited resources. Their problem is that a lot of the infrastructure is in the central part of the North. And most of the companies that make a lot of money and therefore pay more money into Visit North Iceland, like the whale watching companies, are also in the centre. The big hotels are also in the centre. Most of the tourism is there, so a lot of the focus goes there... So those of us that are on the periphery feel and are peripheral. (Sigurður, Appendix D, pp. 9-10)

The Periphery

The periphery is the other big subcategory within the theme of *Location*, however it is almost impossible to separate the notions of periphery and Akureyri as a centre entirely. They are very much related matters given that the location of Akureyri helps construct the image of the outskirts as being peripheral to the centre.

Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, comments on the size of the region, pointing out the differences between the various places within the region.

North Iceland is a third of the entire country in terms of square miles. Which is why we always talk about the Northwest and the Northeast separately. Because the Northwest is about the same size as the Westfjords for example. The Northwest is about the same size as the west, which is about the same size as the east. And Northeast is big. So we have very different visions of Northwest and Northeast, and central versus peripheries as well. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 10)

Sigurður feels that location has a big impact on how engaged companies in the North Iceland region are.

It's very different how involved companies are or not, or how deeply they feel that they are genuinely part of it. And I think the centre is the centre, and the engagement kind of fades the further away you get. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 14)

He feels that it is difficult to engage people because of the distances in the area. He feels that getting people to attend meetings in general is hard, and the distances just make it much more challenging.

I think it's very easy to not be engaged at all... Now we are doing experience development workshops for Arctic Coast Way, and there are only two. There is one in Northwest, there is one in Northeast. And the one in Northwest is as far Eastwards as you can go and still be in Northwest, because it's in Sauðárkrókur. So I'm trying to get my people to go to Sauðárkrókur and pay to be a part of this workshop and spend half a day on it. And Sauðárkrókur is like one and a half hours

away. So I mean it's not that far, but it's still like it's not here. It's not happening here... Getting people to come to a meeting is hard enough, if they have to drive for two hours to get to it as well then it's definitely kind of tricky. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 14)

Sigurður feels that people in the periphery areas often feel unhappy and left out. He feels that Visit North Iceland has so few people working there and thinks that “if they are going to add any more people, they should be adding like these sub-offices” (Sigurður, Appendix D).

Benedikt, owner of Kópasker Hostel, feels a closer connection to his near area because of the feeling of being together on the periphery. They collectively need to work harder to attract tourists to the area, which also provides a sense of connectedness. “There is a much stronger sense that you are connected through the Norðurhjar area, there is quite a difference” (Benedikt, Kópasker Hostel).

He feels more connected to other peripheral areas, than he feels connected to the more central parts of the North. “There are more tourists in the Eyjafjörður and Mývatn area. One could therefore feel more connected to, for example the Westfjords, since that is also a peripheral area” (Benedikt, Appendix Q, p. 124).

Einar, owner of the Northern Lights Hotel, likewise feels more connected to the people in his area and other peripheral areas than to the centre of North Iceland. He mentions that the people in the Northeast corner felt the need to establish a tourism association in order to work together in promoting the area to increase the visibility of it, which they felt was lacking.

We founded a tourism association called Norðurhjar. There we are introducing ourselves. We of course do that also through Visit North Iceland, since we are also members of Visit North Iceland. But we have gone by ourselves to conferences both abroad and here to introduce our area, ourselves. We felt there was a need for that, so we would be able to increase our visibility, in order to achieve that we kind of needed to do it ourselves. (Einar, Appendix P, p. 118)

Einar feels that the people in his area of Northeast Iceland are generally engaged and work well together. They generally feel that their area gets left out in the marketing of North Iceland and therefore feel that it is important that they work together in promoting their area. He feels that other people in peripheral areas around Iceland might share their feelings of receiving too little attention in the context of regional branding and marketing. He gives an example of a conversation he had with two women from the East Iceland region during a conference in South Iceland:

Two women there said they were kind of looking towards what we had done here, in relation to Norðurhjá. They felt that it was a very good thing for us to have done that. They were thinking about making a similar kind of association in the East, even though they have Visit East Iceland there. (Einar, Appendix P, p. 120)

Peripheral infrastructure challenges

The feeling of being a peripheral area is very much connected to the boundaries that the infrastructure creates. The challenge of infrastructure was often mentioned by the interviewees. Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, feels that location has quite an impact on his area, as they are located right on the border with the West and North region. He points out that traditionally people just drive straight through his area, not seeing any attractions out of the window and therefore not stopping there. He takes the South Coast of Iceland as an example. There he pointed out that the main road in the South goes past most of the highlights, and they are quite clearly marked from the main road. While in the North however, many of the highlights are not located close to the main road. Therefore people often just drive past his area on the main road, not releasing all the attractions within the area.

In big parts of the North the main road goes through the most uninteresting parts as opposed to the most interesting parts. So people just go: “Oh, there is nothing to see here, let's just keep going.” When there are wonderful things to see, things that nobody knows about. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 19)

Sigurður points out that this is why the *Arctic Coast Way* is such a good project for the peripheral areas since it encourages visitation in those parts that often get left out. He does however feel that the road conditions might be a little bit tricky at times and also mentions that it might take time for the route to develop and attract visitors (Sigurður, Appendix D).

Interviewee A, from Húnaþing Vestra, lives in the same area as Sigurður and has a similar view. She feels that the location of her tourism business makes it more of a pit stop for tourists and not a destination.

I feel like people are not coming here because they want to come here, I feel like they are passing here and they have to stay here... this county in this region, is more of a stop than a destination. That is a problem with this area, and we need to do a lot of things to make it better. (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 28)

She stresses the fact that the lack of infrastructure is one of the biggest reasons that impedes and slows down the development of tourism in her area. "I think one of the things we need to do, to handle more tourists, we need to make Vatnsnes peninsula road better... It needs to be better, because this peninsula is so pretty" (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 29).

Benedikt, owner of Kópasker Hostel, has a similar viewpoint as Interviewee A. He feels that the peripheral areas are very much defined by the infrastructure and the problems that are associated with them. "Our situation here is pretty well explained in the sense that two out of our three priority projects have to do with the road construction" (Benedikt, Appendix Q, p. 127). He points out that the Icelandic government does not prioritise the infrastructure in the peripheral areas, which means that they have to find ways to fund the projects themselves. "The government has been able to avoid for example the Dettifoss road, it seems that they will continue to ignore this" (Benedikt, Appendix Q, p. 127). The area is very much dependent on the development of the infrastructure in order to sustain and expand their tourism businesses. "A part of this road that leads through here and connects to the road 85 to Dettifoss, well to get more people here, this road needs to be fixed" (Benedikt, Appendix Q, p. 127).

Benedikt feels that the lacking development in infrastructure is impeding the development in the Kópasker area, but has now reached the point where he feels he can no

longer 'fight the system'. "I feel that the problem with distributing the tourists around the country is rooted in a systematic problem. After having been involved so long in this, you just quit fighting the system" (Benedikt, Appendix Q, p. 128).

Although Ragnar, owner of Mývatn Activity, is located near the centre of the region, he does have a good understanding of the challenges that the peripheral areas are faced with. He feels that his area around Lake Mývatn benefits greatly from the short distance to Akureyri, allowing day tour tourism from Akureyri to flourish in the area. He also points out the convenience of having the main highway pass right through the area, while more peripheral areas might struggle more because of lacking infrastructure.

When you have areas like Kópasker and others that are more secluded it's very difficult to get people to go there. They have been spending a lot of time and energy and money to market the area and they have been doing well in making, creating things that attract people. But I think they have a ways to go. Because it is not a big population there. So it is very limited what they can offer. But of course it helps, when for example in this area, we are central. So we could have a day tour there, but for people to go there and stay there, it's going to be challenging. (Ragnar, Appendix K, p. 80)

High and low season

High and low season is the last subcategory within *Location*. The challenges of low and high season are connected to whether a tourism business is located on the periphery or in the centre, and the interviewees experience the challenges differently.

Ragnar, owner of Mývatn Activity, talks about how the location and short distance from Akureyri has helped increase and develop the Mývatn area as a year round destination. He feels that there has been quite an increase in tourism in the area and that the development of the *Northern Lights* brand, for the Mývatn area has helped increase winter tourism in the area. In fact lake Mývatn area has become so popular, that during the summer season they have reached their capacity which is partly dependent on the existing infrastructure.

The summer is fully booked. We can't supply the demand basically. Unless we would hire people, and that gets complicated. In this area we have limiting factors. Like housing, that is the biggest hurdle for us. If you hire people, you have to build a place or we have to find them accommodation, and that's difficult. (Ragnar, Appendix K, p. 82)

Guðmundur, manager of the Hlíðarfjall ski area, operates during the winter season, and he has seen a considerable growth in tourism during this time of year.

I have been here 18 years. And in the beginning you would turn around if you heard a foreign language being spoken in the ski area. But today, I think we are just about to break a 1.000 foreign rentals in the rental shop. Plus all the others that bring their own skis and things like that. So it has come a long way. (Guðmundur, Appendix M, p. 97)

Heba, owner of the restaurants Strikið and Bryggjan, talks about the continuous struggle of the high season vs low season. "If you are not fully booked in the summer time there is something wrong. You are doing something wrong. But it's the other 6-7 months that we are always trying to get more" (Heba, Appendix O, p. 111).

Einar, owner of Northern Lights Hotel also struggles with the high and low season challenge. He is not able to keep the business running during the winter season since there are not enough tourists in that time. He feels that the tourism is however slightly increasing in his area during the summer season (Einar, Appendix P).

Interviewee D, employee at Mývatn Nature Baths, feels that branding the North as one location really helps even out the differences between high and low season, which otherwise is a big challenge in the North.

I think Visit North Iceland, they have been really good at this, and they are also branding North Iceland as a winter destination. And we really need that. I mean, we have this high season during the summertime, where we get really many visitors here, but we need to get more visitors during winter time. And I think their work is really good. Also if you look at SuperBreak. If you knew that they came here. That

was really good. We saw an increase here in our customers this winter compared to the winter before. (Interviewee D, Appendix L, p. 87)

Interviewee D further elaborates. “January and February are our quietest months, and we had an increase of about 17 or 20 % or something” (Interviewee D, Appendix L, p. 87).

5.2.1 Discussion about Location

Location of the interviewees was clearly a dividing factor in the interviewee’s views towards the regional branding of North Iceland. The three interviewees in the Northeast corner all mentioned frequently their local tourism association, Norðurhjarí. They felt engaged in tourism and marketing of their region, but mainly in relation to the Northeast area. They felt that Visit North Iceland was not highlighting their area and therefore feel more excluded from the overall branding process. The distance from the Northeast area to Akureyri played a crucial role, since they are slightly too far away to really benefit from the day tour tourism that has developed in Akureyri and surroundings. This relates heavily to the issue of infrastructure as well, since the peripheral areas were found to suffer more in relation to poor funding and the lacking infrastructure there is often associated with bad road conditions.

A lot of the current emphasis in North Iceland revolves around the direct flights to Akureyri, the cruise ships that dock there during the summer, and popular day tours to the famous Mývatn area and Húsavík, the Whale Watching Capital of Iceland, which are all located in a convenient distance from Akureyri. Similar criticism was expressed by the interviewees on the other peripheral area in the west corner of the region. They are also located too far away from Akureyri to be a viable option for day tour excursions from there. They felt that there was a lot of attention going into promoting these main attractions all located around Akureyri and did not represent the whole region. The development of the *Arctic Coast Way* project was however considered to be a positive development by the interviewees on the peripheral areas, both in the Northwest and the North East, given that it is designed to attract more tourism to those areas. There is however a challenging factor in that project, which has to do with road conditions, since they were mentioned to be especially problematic in the peripheral areas. Road construction is very expensive and

some of the interviewees in the peripheral areas are concerned with the lacking priority of fixing infrastructure problems such as the roads in the peripheral areas.

The closer to Akureyri and surroundings the Interviewees were, the more positive they were to ongoing development, branding and collaboration within the region. The people in the Mývatn area did also engage in their own collaboration within their closer circles but still exhibited feelings of being very much tied to Akureyri, since most of the people visiting Akureyri would visit Mývatn and vice versa. There was also a considerable difference between how the people in Akureyri and neighbouring areas experienced the difference between high and low season. The further away from Akureyri and the surrounding areas, the more problematic the season fluctuation became. So the development going on in the North that helps even out the seasonal fluctuations seemed to benefit mostly the people closer to Akureyri.

It was interesting to note that most of the interviewees did consider themselves to be engaged in the process of branding. The people near Akureyri felt generally connected to the brand of North Iceland and felt engaged in the process. The people further away from Akureyri did often consider themselves more engaged with the localised branding, collaboration and development of tourism within their near area rather than with North Iceland as a whole.

North Iceland is a large area that consists of multiple smaller regions. Not all of the smaller regions will have exactly the same benefits of different development projects through the region. Visit North Iceland acknowledges this fact and understands that stakeholder engagement will differ throughout the region, depending on multiple factors as well as on the different projects and emphasis that is ongoing at that time. Arnheiður, the managing director of Visit North Iceland, states that:

I think, you cannot say that the companies on the edge are participating less, but there are bits of the region where companies are participating less. And I think that comes down to the number of companies, and also just the characters of people who live there. Because the engagement is just based on the character. Do you have a person who is willing and able, and who has the time and the money and the knowledge, who is outgoing. Often if people don't participate it's just because they are shy. Basically it's not more complex than that. There are bits here that could

point to and say: “These are not participating at all.” But then that changes all the time. So it comes in waves. And working very closely with one region this year and next year not. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 140)

She stresses the fact that fostering engagement amongst the tourism companies in the region is absolutely vital for them. “It's just vital. We would not exist if we didn't have that. And it's vital in every action that we have” (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 141). They take extra care to make sure that the region is always represented as a whole when attending different shows and when working with the regional image.

They also seem to be aware of the fact that the different areas within the region will have different priorities and will be impacted upon differently by various development projects. In the recently established DMP work that has been mentioned earlier in this paper, they divide the North Iceland region up into four areas to better examine different development opportunities and to uncover collective images of each area. There is a considerable distance between the office of Visit North Iceland and to the peripheral area in the Northeast corner. Visit North Iceland only has six employees, so it is of course going to be difficult to establish a presence up there. That is also why they rely so much on good communications with the local tourism associations in the various areas. All of the interviewees in the peripheral area, that associate themselves with Norðurhjari tourism association, feel that Visit North Iceland is doing their best to attend various events and meetings while trying to establish a good relationship with Norðurhjari. Nick, owner of Bárán restaurant, who is also on the board of Norðurhjari, cannot come up with any better way for reaching out to Norðurhjari area than Visit North Iceland already does. He does however feel that Norðurhjari area is just fundamentally different and that it does not really benefit from the regional branding of North Iceland. All of the members of Norðurhjari feel that they are a bit on their own in their branding and marketing efforts for the region. Arnheiður from Visit North Iceland describes how they have put even more emphasis on increasing their presence throughout the region. She describes how they have decreased the number of meetings in Akureyri and put emphasis on attending the various regional meetings in North Iceland. They are listening to their needs and objectives, rather than just showing up and telling them how things should be done.

We used to have what we called soup meetings, regularly. We stopped that two years ago and decided to have a big meeting in the spring and a big meeting in the fall instead, and then attend meetings that were organized by the regions. So we attend a lot of meetings that are organized by the regions, and I think that is better, that means the people working in the field are planning the topic. Instead of us coming and telling them what to talk about. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 141)

Arnheiður acknowledges that people are often unhappy with how little they see of Visit North Iceland. She points to the fact that the region is very large and they are very few.

We are always travelling. But I would say that people are always unhappy with how little they see of us. But that is basically based on the size of the region and the number of staff, we just can't travel anymore. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 141)

Based on the views of the tourism companies then there was almost always a sense of engagement amongst them. What varied the most was whether that engagement was mainly directed at the tourism development in their near area or whether they felt a strong connection to the overall regional image. Visit North Iceland, with its very limited resources, has found a very useful tactic in order to effectively engage communities throughout the region by creating a strong collaboration with different representatives within the smaller regions. They have also been able to tackle the difficulty of distributing their attention equally over the whole region, by using different development projects within different places. This can of course cause tension within the areas that are not receiving direct benefits of said project. There is also a need to consider, power relations within the destination, since development projects are often publicly funded and can rely on political decision making processes.

In relation to how the development projects are chosen and funded, then there is of course a political nature involved. Tuler and Webler (1999) highlighted the need to give people at the destination fair advantages, so that not only people with more resources can effectively impact the process in question. This is an element that Visit North Iceland has to have in mind in their destination management, since unequal distribution of power can impede engagement. This is of course an unavoidable problem at a destination considering

the political nature of tourism planning, which is rooted in the complicated networks between the community, government and the industry (Bramwell, 2010; Wesley & Pforr, 2010; Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Hall, 2011; Healy, Rau & McDonagh, 2012; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

The influence of location on the engagement levels of the interviewees was very much related to typical problems that are evident in the theoretical section, relating to challenges that DMOs are faced with in their engagement practices and stakeholder management at destinations. It relates closely to power struggle between the centre vs peripheral, especially in relation to distribution of benefits and infrastructure priorities.

5.3 Collaboration Circles

Collaboration Circles is the last of the three themes presented in the analysis. The theme of *Collaboration Circles* seems to be present throughout the interviews in every context, which can be expected given that the nature of stakeholder engagement and place branding are rooted in different forms of collaboration. *Collaboration Circles* as a theme deals with the different layers of collaboration. The majority of the interviewees claimed to identify more with their local community rather than the overall region of North Iceland. Many of them felt that the region was too large for one clear image that could possibly represent all the different communities, since they had different identities and different challenges. Tourism Associations were mentioned frequently as an organizing structure around the near area collaboration practices. Some of the interviewees felt equally connected to their community and the overall region of North Iceland, and claimed to collaborate equally throughout the region. It became evident that people had multiple collaboration practices going on simultaneously within different groups of society. *Collaboration Circles* embodies the different views and identifications of the interviewees in regards to their circles of collaboration, both within their near area and community, as well as with the overall collaboration circle that spans the North Iceland region.

Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, points out that people in different areas within the region will have different priorities in regards to tourism, so people in small areas that share the same challenges and opportunities, often group together to collaborate on things that directly relates to their area. “We are also dealing with very different things. We

have different opportunities, and we also have different strategies” (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 19).

Interviewee C, employee at North Sailing, feels that collaboration is essential for their business. She feels that the collaboration is equally important within her near community as well as with the North Iceland region as a whole. She describes the close collaboration between the whale watching companies that are all located in the town of Húsavík.

We have advertised Húsavík as the whale watching capital of Iceland, and this a collaboration between all the whale watching companies in this town. There are four companies that are doing whale watching here in Húsavík at the moment, and this is something we created together. (Interviewee C, Appendix J, p. 73)

She also mentions the local collaboration of Visit Húsavík that is involved with the brand of Húsavík as the whale watching capital of Iceland. She describes how the whole town participates in their own branding process of Húsavík. “I think it is very important, that we always use this when we are attending shows and so on to promote Húsavík and not only our company. So all collaboration is 100% necessary, I think” (Interviewee C, Appendix J, p. 73).

Ragnar, owner of Mývatn Activities, describes how he collaborates in different circles. One has to do with Visit North Iceland and the whole of North Iceland and the other one is a local collaboration in his area around Lake Mývatn.

We have Visit North Iceland and then we have another one that is just for the Mývatn area. So I collaborate with both of them. And I think is very important to get everybody involved, the hotels and the tour operators, and everybody to kind of represent what is going on in the area as a whole. (Ragnar, Appendix K, p. 77)

Interviewee A, from Húnaþing Vestra, feels that she collaborates mainly with her near area because she shares the same identity as them. She points out that she feels that North Iceland is divided up by different areas “I also feel like maybe Húnaþing Vestra, Skagafjörður and Blönduós have more in common, and then Akureyri, Mývatn and that part

have more in common. I feel like these are two different areas. Not one area” (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 35). She says that she collaborates and communicates exclusively to the people in her near area. “I am not in much contact with other tourism companies outside of my personal area, Húnaþing Vestra... I am in a lot of contact with people from this county. We help each other out in a lot of ways” (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 25).

Auður, owner of Infinity Blue, is very open for collaboration at every level in the region of North Iceland. She mentioned that when increasing amount of people in her nearest area in Skagafjörður started to venture into tourism, they decided to form a local tourism association to enhance the local collaboration. “So with all of these people in tourism in the area we ended up forming an association called "local heart" to try to establish more collaboration between us” (Auður, Appendix H, p. 56).

When asked about her motivation levels and engagement in relation to tourism in North Iceland Interviewee A, from Húnaþing Vestra, felt that her engagement was activated through the small tourism collaboration circle in her county. She mentions that Sigurður, the manager of the Seal Center who is also the head of the local tourism association in Húnaþing Vestra is a key person in fostering participation and engagement amongst the tourism companies in her region. “Sigurður is also like this “go to guy”. You know, if you need something. And he connects us together, and he is also encouraging people to take part in some, like workshops” (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 26). She mentions an example of how Sigurður managed to get her to participate when she was not going to take part in a workshop that was coming up.

There is going to be a workshop now here. I was not going to go to this workshop, because I was just too busy. Had my head in the sand, digging in my things. But Sigurður called me like: “Hey, did you know it would be really good if you would be there.” And then I signed up for it. (Interviewee A, Appendix E, pp. 26-27)

She feels that due to his motivation levels he is able to engage the rest of the people in her area. She points out that his position is to represent them in the area, but she feels that his personality and motivation has a positive impact on how he gets people to collaborate and participate in tourism. “He kind of has to do it as the president of the of the

tourist board in this area, but I think it is also his personality. He is a very motivated and active guy” (Interviewee A, Appendix E, p. 2).

Interviewee D, employee at Mývatn Nature baths, talks about lake Mývatn area having a close collaboration circle within its locality. The collaboration is organized around Visit Mývatn, which she feels does a good job at representing them “That is a really good concept for us here, because she [the head of the tourism association] is keeping all the companies here together, so we can do the same thing for the area” (Interviewee D, Appendix L, p. 88). She talks about the importance of everybody in the Mývatn area to communicate the same brand image, which in their case is *The Northern Lights Capital*.

Interviewee D, employee at Mývatn Nature Baths, talks about the importance of the local collaboration circle and branding of the Mývatn area. She still finds it important to collaborate and participate in the bigger collaboration circle, which has to do with branding the entire North Iceland region. She talks about how she would sometimes go directly to Visit Mývatn when working with matters that are mainly local and how she would sometimes go directly to Visit North Iceland when the matter has to do with the whole region (Interviewee D, Appendix L). She does however feel more connected to the local image of Mývatn area than to the overall branding image of the North Iceland region.

I wish I could say that I feel like that we are really connected. But if I'm honest that's not really the case. Of course we are in the North of Iceland. Maybe that is something we need to do better. We always just kind of look at the area.
(Interviewee D, Appendix L, p. 91).

Norðurhjarl Tourism Association

The collaboration practices of the tourism companies in the Northeast corner through Norðurhjarl tourism association are especially strong, and the three interviewees from the area all shared a feeling of identifying more strongly with their local region in the East, rather than with North Iceland as a whole.

Einar, owner of the Northern Lights Hotel, feels that the members of Norðurhjarl “are very united and coordinated and that applies to everyone regardless of what kind of tourism activity they are involved” (Einar, Appendix P, p. 118). He feels that people’s drive and willingness to participate rests mainly on the collaboration activities within Norðurhjarl.

He explains that the people in the area founded the association when they felt that their area was not benefitting enough from the work that Visit North Iceland does. They felt they needed to come together and work towards increasing the visibility in their area. Einar further explains that:

The foundation of Norðurhjari enables a close feeling of collaboration, we know more about one another, we pay more attention to each other, support one another, recommend each other. All of this enables a better team work which would not be so strong if we had not founded Norðurhjari. (Einar, Appendix P, p. 120)

Benedikt, owner of Kópasker Hostel also feels that he collaborates more through the tourism association Norðurhjari than with Visit North Iceland directly, although he feels that they help out as well. He feels that the people in his area are generally positive towards tourism and willing to participate but primarily through Norðurhjari. He also points out that in relation to ongoing projects, such as *the Arctic Coast Way*, the communication mostly happens through Norðurhjari rather than directly through Visit North Iceland, who are the ones that direct the project. They do however regularly attend the meetings of Norðurhjari and have been good at presenting their work and other projects there (Benedikt, Appendix Q).

Nick, owner of Bárán Restaurant, feels that Visit North Iceland is very active at reaching out to his area

I really feel like the staff is always reaching out to us, because they do come here to Þórshöfn a couple of times a year to meet with everybody. And I think they are trying to become familiar, and get us to work with them and vice versa. (Nick, Appendix R, p. 131)

Nick talks about the strong collaboration amongst the local community. He mentions that he feels that their image is a bit different from the rest of North Iceland, due to their location and distance from the centre of the region. They therefore concentrate more on their local collaboration circle that represents the Northeast region, through the work of Norðurhjari. He feels that people are generally quite engaged within that collaboration

circle. He feels that the work of North Iceland does not directly impact them, therefore they focus on their own emphasis in attracting people to their area. Nick further highlights the scope and independence of Norðurhjari, describing how they organize their own funding both from within the members of Norðurhjari but also through the support of the local municipalities and use that funding to attend travel shows independently from Visit North Iceland and produce market material for their area.

We have always been independent when we have gone to Vestnorden, tourist market, or the Icelandair tourist market, trying to promote the businesses that are in Þórshöfn and Raufarhöfn and Kópasker and around Ásbyrgi. And therefore we have also been coming up and paying for our own brochures that we put together about the area. And we have meetings once a month, we try to at least. (Nick, Appendix R, p. 134)

He further talks about how they organize yearly trips around the area so that the members of Norðurhjari can stay updated on each other's activities and with that increase a sense of collaboration and participation.

Collaboration in Projects

The interviewees generally regard tourism development projects as being very good for enhancing collaboration between different communities and areas within the region of North Iceland. Viggo, Manager of Tindastóll ski area, points out quite clearly how a project can span over an area of several local geographical boundaries and with that foster collaboration between smaller communities.

I think it is very important for us here in the Northwest in Skagafjörður, I mean we are working with Arctic Coast Way, Bird Watching, and so on. And then we work together with the others within the North. And from Hrútafjörður to Langanes. And that is a huge area. I think the opportunity to work together, it's more important for us to work more together. (Viggo, Appendix G, p. 49)

Viggo further points out that this type of collaboration that unifies the whole area of North Iceland is particularly important to attract visitors since visitor's will identify more with going to North Iceland than with smaller localities in Iceland.

We have to talk about North Iceland. Because it doesn't matter to people that are coming from other countries, they are going North, and they are not thinking about Northwest or Northeast. I think we have to market the area in the North, the North part of Iceland. (Viggo, Appendix G, p. 45)

He feels that the same philosophy applies to different types of collaboration within the North region, such as with the project *Ski Iceland*. "In the ski areas, we are not talking about just Tindastóll or just the ski area in Siglufjörður. We are in the North Iceland and we are Ski Iceland" (Viggo, Appendix G, p. 45).

Guðmundur, manager of Hlíðarfjall ski area, says that most of his collaboration happens through the project *Ski Iceland*. "We mostly just do collaboration with the other four ski areas. And we go as far west as Sauðárkrókur, and then Siglufjörður and Dalvík, and Ólafsfjörður" (Guðmundur, Appendix M, p.97).

Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center, points out some of the difficulties involved with big collaboration projects in the region, such as the *Arctic Coast Way* project that he is involved in. He feels that the number of representatives involved causes the steering of the project to become very complicated. He further points out that collaboration in a place as big as North Iceland region is usually quite complicated because of its size.

Right now I'm in the steering group for a project called Arctic Coast Way, which is a project for the whole of the North. But I mean straight away, when you start talking about all the stakeholders, you begin with the municipalities, and there are 20 of them in the North. So each of them need to have an officer included. So that's 20 people, that's before you start to get the tourism involved. And so you end up with these enormous groups that become very inefficient, really. (Sigurður, Appendix D, p. 11)

5.3.1 Discussion on Collaboration Circles

When it comes to collaboration in North Iceland it is evident that it does not happen as one cohesive coordinated event. Rather, it takes place in circles of different sizes that often overlap and interconnect. There is an evident need for organizing structures to facilitate this collaboration, and the interviewees report on how their different local collaboration circles, especially, the local tourism associations help provide this structure. All of them are very happy with these initiatives, and many of them feel that these local associations make it much easier for them to collaborate. The tourism businesses that are located further on the periphery are often especially invested in their local tourism associations, as they feel they better represent the local areas, which they identify stronger with than the North as a whole.

Lally et al (2015) state that, structuring of stakeholder engagement was found to impact the effectiveness of engagement activities, boost the collaborative union of stakeholders and impact destination competitiveness. Visit North Iceland plays a vital role in the coordinating efforts between a large and diverse group of stakeholders in North Iceland. According to Thomson, Perry and Miller (2007) these coordinating efforts affect whether or not stakeholders chose to participate in collaboration. Furthermore, these efforts help the stakeholders understand their roles in the region, which increases the possibility of participation and engagement.

Since Visit North Iceland are limited by lack of manpower, then establishing close collaboration with local collaboration circles in the various communities throughout the region, is very important in order to coordinate the collaboration on a regional scale. Arnheiður, managing director of Visit North Iceland, described how they ensure good collaboration with the various municipalities within the region through regular meetings with the tourism officials from the municipalities. Where there is not a tourism official then they will often establish communication with the local tourism association instead.

We have the meetings with the tourism officials of the municipalities... Where there are not tourism officials we try to figure out the tourism associations and find the key person there, and bring her into the meetings. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 142)

The existence of the local tourism associations is very important to ensure good collaboration throughout the region, as Visit North Iceland cannot have a constant presence in every small area.

I would say it is crucial for us to have a connection in each region, because we are small with a big area. And we feel that when we don't have a person in the region, it's bad. We don't have a person for example in Húsavík now, and there is a crisis there. Because there is nobody there really holding the hands of the tourism companies. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 142)

Arnheiður further explained that they take into consideration the specific situations within each place, since there can be quite a difference between tourism officials, representatives of different associations and so forth.

Sometimes the tourism official has a job for the municipality and 20% of it is supposed to be for tourism. It basically means that he can do only so much and is not very active. In other parts, like in Northwest, we have a staff member of SSNV, who is working for tourism in the whole of Northwest. He can help us when we are planning a thing for the whole region. And we can also talk to the tourism association in Húnaþing Vestra, which is one part of Northwest. You know it kind of depends on the project. (Arnheiður, Appendix S, p. 142)

She feels that it is sometimes better to engage the companies directly, depending on the nature of the meeting in question. She also points to the tourism system being quite complicated, because there are so many different people involved in tourism both from the public sector and the private sector. This type of assessment and understanding that Visit North Iceland shows in their approach to engagement processes can be considered as showcasing high level of social skills and public diplomacy. Horlings (2012) considers those types of attributes to have positive impact on engagement amongst destination stakeholders.

As Arnheiður has pointed out, there can be quite a difference between representatives. This means that even though two people share the same title in two

communities they might not possess the same skills, have adequate time, resources or the characteristics that are needed to engage the community and foster collaboration with Visit North Iceland. This is something that Visit North Iceland does acknowledge and therefore tailor their communication and engagement efforts accordingly, depending on the community in question. The importance of the characteristics of the representatives was also touched upon in some of the interviews. Many of the interviewees referred to specific local leaders of tourism associations, who they felt were their main contact person. Interviewee A, from Húnaþing Vestra, describes how Sigurður, manager of the Seal Center and chairman of Visit Hunathing, tourism association was able to increase her engagement level in the local tourism by reaching out to her.

There is going to be workshop now here. I was not going to go to this workshop, because I was just too busy. Had my hand in the sand, digging in my things. But Sigurður called me like: "Hey, did you know it would be really good if you would be there." And then I signed up for it. (Interviewee A, Appendix E, pp. 26-27)

Visit North Iceland has structured their DMO work in such a way, that they become the combining factor that ties the many small collaboration circles together. This seems to be a very ingenious way of working around their lack of resources and manpower, but still ensuring the collaboration across the entire North Iceland. Visit North Iceland puts effort into helping and cultivating the smaller circles of collaboration, and then helps those circles connect to others in the region, and with that fostering an overall sense of collaboration across the region. If Visit North Iceland did not employ this sort of umbrella collaboration role, they would be stretched too thin in order to try and reach all the tourism stakeholders in North Iceland. This seems to be a valuable method, that could be applied by DMO's of other destinations, where lacking resources and sheer size of area work as barriers.

6 Conclusion

This project has focused on the views and attitudes of the tourism companies in North Iceland towards the regional branding of the area. The overall aim was to uncover what factors influence the stakeholder engagement amongst the tourism companies.

Most of the tourism companies described a level of engagement towards the tourism development in the region, however the engagement differed based on the location of the participants. The engagement with the regional brand was the strongest amongst the tourism companies that were located closer to the centre of the region, where the infrastructure and development are currently in the foreground. The companies on the periphery were generally engaged in tourism but more in relation to their local areas and did not feel very connected with the North Iceland brand. Location was therefore one of the factors that impacted stakeholder engagement in the region.

Understanding how participating in the branding process could benefit the individual companies was also found to affect the engagement levels. An effective dissemination of information was found to be a crucial element to foster understanding of those benefits amongst the tourism companies. It became evident as well that not all of the tourism companies understood the difference between branding and marketing, with some of them focusing more on instant results and not understanding the long term effect that branding entails. Furthermore, it became evident that many of the tourism companies feel that the brand image of North Iceland is not very clear, while some felt that there was none and that it was mostly made up of a list of different attractions throughout the region. The website of Visit North Iceland was referenced in that context, where the point was made that the website did not really exhibit a clear brand image, but rather just a list of information. These findings suggest that Visit North Iceland might want to reconsider their branding image or at least how it is communicated. The findings furthermore suggest that an increased focus should be placed on real time communication through an online platform of some type. This could enhance the flow of information as well as enhance the brand communication with a special emphasis of involving the residents. The managing director of Visit North Iceland, is however aware of the need for an online platform, but the problem is mostly rooted in lack of funding. This should however be emphasized in the near future in order to enhance the branding communication.

The final element that was found to impact stakeholder engagement in North Iceland, were the internal communications within the various local collaboration circles, which were primarily associated with local tourism associations. In the case of North Iceland it seems that there is a tendency amongst small communities to establish close circles of collaboration through tourism associations. There also seems to be a high level of engagement amongst tourism companies towards the local tourism associations, especially in the communities that are located in the periphery areas. Visit North Iceland is a DMO that is faced with many of the typical problems that DMOs face, such as lack of funding, limited number of staff and a large area with a diverse group of stakeholders to engage. There does however seem to be a good level of engagement towards their branding endeavour in the region and people are generally positive towards their work. They are able to structure their engagement activities by accessing the various communities through representatives of the inner collaboration circles, which are often tourism association representatives or tourism officials at local municipalities. Visit North Iceland use social skill to evaluate the specific circumstances within each community, and select the best way to engage the people there depending on the social structures in place. This allows them to engage effectively throughout the region without having to have a constant presence in each place, which in their case is difficult due to distances and limited man power.

This tactic of engagement practice was not mentioned specifically in the literature review in this project. This tactic could prove beneficial for other destinations on the global scale, who are faced with similar difficulty of engaging stakeholders in a large area with multiple communities, where social circles are many and where there is a lack of manpower and limited resources in general. This tactic described is by no means a flawless activity and there are of course many adjustments that can be made to further enhance the practice, but it does however indicate a point of departure within the destination management field that is worth a closer examination.

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