



Destination Image and Travel Blogs

Influences of Travel Bloggers and Blog Collaboration on
Destination Image Formation

Case Study of Iceland

Master's thesis 30 credits

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Abstract

Travel bloggers share their experiences and travel stories using different kinds of social networks and digital channels. They are seen as a trusted source of information and marketers have noticed the benefits of using influencers as partners in their marketing campaigns. Collaborations with companies and monetizing blogs has though become quite a common phenomenon. This case study is looking to find out the role of travel bloggers in destination image formation in Iceland as well as to find out if destination images are being affected by commercial features through blogs. This in mind, nine semi-structured interviews and four open-ended self-completion questionnaires were conducted with 13 travel bloggers who are or have been writing about Iceland. The findings show that bloggers do have power to influence destination images by sharing information but to what extent depends on different matters. Also the possibility of mediating commercial pictures depends on the style and authenticity of the blogger.

Key words: Travel Blogs, Destination Image, Influencers, Social Media Marketing, Iceland

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1 Introduction

Traveling creates stories and stories are meant to be told. We can read all kinds of travel stories from news and magazines but also from the Internet which has become one of the most popular source of (travelling) information these days (IPK International 2015; Technorati 2013). Stories are also powerful message mediators that can influence people's opinions and perceptions of things and places. Also, where the story comes from plays an important role in determining if the information received is considered as trustworthy.

The power of stories and who is telling them as well how they are told in order to make a difference in destination marketing was discussed quite vastly in the convention lectures of the eTravel World at the ITB Berlin 2016. Mr. Rob Holmes (personal communications 10 March 2016) claimed that storytelling can be a way to diversify (marketing) content but also to connect people to authentic experiences. Mr. Jan Schmirmund and Mrs. Catharina Fischer (personal communications 10 March 2016) talked about influencer marketing and mediating the (marketing) story to consumers by using influencers such as bloggers as storytellers to make the message more personal and authentic without using marketing slogans and still make a valid point.

Blogger is a person who writes or updates a blog which is shortened from "web logs," that are described as personal, journal-like written online stories on a single entry web page displayed in reverse chronological order, created by anyone (e.g. Volo 2012; Rosenkranz 2015; Chan et al. 2012). Most often content is in written format, but pictures, videos, audios and links to other blogs or web sites are common features in blog posts (Batancor Garía et al. 2012). Blog content is often referred to as storytelling and narratives because oftentimes blogs are like diaries created in purpose of sharing experiences and memories through a web page (Bosangit 2014).

Online publishing has become more and more popular, like blogging has become a popular form of user generated content (UGC) and electronic word-of-mouth. Sepp et al. (2011) determined that there were more than 160 million blogs listed by 2011 by Blogpulse.com. However, the number of blogs is not very accurate to update since there are new blogs appearing every day and in contrast there are many abandoned or inactive blogs that still exist (Cenite et al. 2009), so the number can vary a lot depending on the criteria of how to count the blogs.

When blogs and online magazines get more attention, printed magazines have started to lose their influence power because the paper will be gone and hopefully recycled after it's been read. Blog posts live longer and can be returned to later like Mrs. Inna-Pirietta Lahti (personal communications 11 March 2016) said in the panel discussion at the ITB Berlin 2016. However, blogs don't appeal automatically to everybody but when using the most traditional search engines like Google, it is highly likely to get hits from blog posts. Reading one story from a blog doesn't necessarily make a person a loyal follower right away but that story, that blog post, might have been helpful for the user as a single case when searching information.

Travel bloggers' influences on tourism as well as their motivations to write is quite an understudied field. General motives of individual bloggers have got some attention but Sepp et al. (2011) points out that no differences have been distinguished between corporate or professional and hobbyist bloggers concerning their motives for blogging neither their commercial interests. Furthermore, Hwang & Jeong (2016) state that the effects of sponsored blog posts have not been examined that much either nor the effects of types of disclosing commercial posts. There are more articles written about how to create connections with blogs and how to implement blogs to marketing plans (e.g. Uzunogulu & Misci Kip 2014; Dobebe et al. 2015; Hsu & Ou Yang 2013). There are also studies about consumers' travel intentions and purchase behavior in relation with blogs but focusing mostly in quantitative approach looking into consumers' opinions (Liljander et al. 2015) and analyzing the blog content (Çakmak & Isaac 2012).

Some products mentioned in blogs have become popular and in some extreme cases even sold out from the stores (Sepp et al. 2011). However, it is acknowledged that sometimes products presented in the blogs are part of a marketing plan. This

phenomenon raises the question of ethics which has been a lot discussed topic in the field of travel and lifestyle journalism (e.g. Hanusch 2010; 2011; Hanusch et al. 2015; Rosenkranz 2015). The question is relevant in the field of blogging as well, since the popularity of marketing in blogs and the pursuit of beneficial media space and visibility has increased among companies (Alizadeh & Mat Isa 2015). In addition, the authenticity of the recommendations can be questioned if commercial offers are affecting the motivations to create blog content (Banyai 2012).

It is not that clearly defined in research publications how precisely bloggers participate to, or influence the destination image formation process, and what are the actual factors that are seen influencing the destination image communicated by travel bloggers. Banyai (2009) used blogs as a source for destination image creation in her Master's thesis about Dracula tourism in 2009, but in the form of analyzing the blog content. DMOs of Iceland, United Kingdom, Ireland and South Africa discussed the possibilities of involving bloggers to their campaigns at the ITB Berlin 2016 mentioning for example press trips and involving the blogger to the whole process to avoid misunderstandings of the final objectives. However, as mentioned these were comments of tourism boards, not covered in the research.

1.1 Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to get a better understanding of the role of travel bloggers in destination image formation. To tackle the problem, two research questions are proposed:

1. How do travel bloggers influence the destination image formation?
2. Is the destination image influenced by commercial motivations through blogging?

To answer these questions more in detail, a case study was conducted focusing on travel blogs that cover Iceland in their content as well as the destination image of Iceland. Many of the conducted studies about travel blogs are focused mostly in locations such as North America, Australia and New Zealand as well as Asia which

is not that surprising since majority of blogs are based in USA, UK, Australia and Canada (Bosangit 2014). It also means that not that many studies have been conducted covering European nor Nordic travel blogs. Iceland has grown a lot as a tourism destination during the last few years in general as well as in comparison with other Nordic Countries (Mr. Daði Guðjónsson, personal communications, 29 March 2016) which makes Iceland an interesting case since the interest and awareness of the country has increased a lot during quite a short time.

The first research question looks into the influencing possibilities that travel blogs and travel bloggers might have regarding destination images of places presented in travel blogs. What are the methods bloggers use that might influence destination images? The communication style and the level of credibility are said to make a difference to the type of destination image agent bloggers can be related to in terms of if bloggers are seen as commercial or personal source of information.

The second research question focuses on commercial influences in the blog content. In this regard the authenticity of the content shared in blogs and the ethics of the bloggers is studied in terms of commercial influences and marketing possibilities of blogs. How appealing commercial co-operation is to bloggers? What kind of influences the co-operation has on the style, the content and the motive behind the blog post.

Answers to both research questions are based on nine semi-structured interviews and four open-ended self-completion questionnaires with both Icelandic and Iceland based travel bloggers as well as travel bloggers who have spent time in Iceland and like this have references to Iceland in their blogs. The objective of the case study is to get deeper information from the point of view of travel bloggers since most of the previous studies have been focusing more on quantitative methods in analyzing blog content or the consumers' perceptions of their influences. Previous researches have been stressing the benefits of blogs as trusted source of information as well as being a powerful media that reaches large audiences. That is why the interest in this study was to ask the bloggers how do they see themselves, what motives them to blog and if they feel being able to influence by blogging.

The paper consists of theoretical background that presents the destination image formation process and some destination marketing strategies following the lead of trends presented at the ITB Berlin 2016 covering the aspects of using influencers and social media in destination marketing. The third chapter discusses some findings from previous researches covering topics such as blogging motivations, ethical rules, blog co-operation as well as how blogs have been used as marketing tools. The methods chapter gives an overview of how the study was conducted after which the findings are represented and analyzed within a thematic framework. Also answers to the research questions are discussed in the conclusion chapter that summarizes the presented case study.

2 Theoretical Background

The following chapter presents the theoretical background of the study by first describing the destination image formation process and the different ways of looking at the influential factors. Next, two rather combined marketing strategies that have been present lately in online tourism marketing are explained because of the high connectivity to the trend of monetizing blogs.

2.1 Destination Image Formation

Destination image is most often described as a picture or idea formatted by knowledge, impressions, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of a place created by tourists and visitors or, by consumers (e.g. Munar 2011; Banyai 2012; Chen et al. 2014; Marine-Roig & Clavé 2016).

Shani & Wang (2011) state that Destination image became a crucial concept in tourism destination marketing dating back to 1970's. Pike (2008) reminds that the role of the destination image is important in destination marketing since tourism products are mostly intangible services and experiences, also often created simultaneously when consumed. That is why they cannot be tested or tried out before actually purchasing one. The way to sell these products is through images which give a hint of tangibility of the actual product (Pike 2008).

Image is always created by the perceiving counterpart (e.g. Munar 2011; Banyai 2012; Chen et al. 2014; Marine-Roig & Clavé 2016). Destination image creation starts from the destination identity, the image that the destination would like to be seen as by visitors. The image starts building up by picking up pieces from brand positioning messages, personal perceptions and experiences of the geographical place, settling in the minds of the consumers as they see it (Pike 2008; Hall et al. 2009).

The image formation process is affected by the personal background, the nationality and the culture of the person, and it is shaped by personal behavior since the image is personal for everybody (Sun et al. 2015; Çakmak & Isaac 2012). Chen et al. (2014) add that the image development takes time and is affected not only by commercial sources but also personal connections, recommendations and experiences from friends and family, by word-of-mouth. However, the image is personally formatted from only a part of selected impressions and ideas (Pan et al. 2014). A definition of image by Fakeye & Crompton (1991, p. 10 cited by Pan et al. 2014, p.703) is represented in order to take this fact into account as follows: “... *the mental construct developed by a potential visitor on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of total impressions...*”.

2.1.1 Destination Image by Gartner and Gunn

Eight image formation agents by Gartner (1993) are well-known way to define the image creation process (Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013; Banyai 2012; Pike 2008). These agents range from traditional forms of advertising to family and friends being the source of information (word-of-mouth), also taking into account the level of involvement of commercial motives that vary a lot depending on the agent. Their influence in general is based on the perceived credibility by the consumer (Banyai 2012). Firstly, *overt induced agents I and II*, are seen as traditional forms of advertising. First one in its most original form of advertisement by companies, and the second one, including tour operators who in addition make it possible to interact with consumer during the process (Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013). *Covert induced agents I* are promotional information communicated by a trusted spokesperson like a celebrity, and in the case of *covert induced agents II* the source of information comes from second-party but being quite a neutral source like newspaper article (Pike 2008) or involvement of commercial motivations are not directly mentioned (Banyai 2012).

Autonomous image formation agents are from independent sources like news or popular culture (Pike 2008). *Unsolicited organic agents* provide unrequested information (usually from friends), when *solicited organic agents* provide requested information coming from a reliable source of information (also often

from friends) (Banyai 2012; Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013). *Organic agents* comprehend credible sources and information shared is based on previous knowledge and personal experience (Banyai 2012; Pike 2008; Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013).

Another traditional way to see the formation of destination image is to look into *cognitive* and *affective* components by Gartner (1993) (Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013; Banyai 2012). The cognitive dimension is the mental component and it refers to person's beliefs and knowledge about the destination. It may be affected by previous knowledge and it shows awareness. Affective dimension again is based on person's feelings and emotions about the knowledge. These feelings can be either neutral or positively or negatively charged (Marine-Roig & Clavé 2016; Banyai 2012; Pike 2008). Baloglu & McCleary (2008, p. 870 cited by Banyai 2012, p.425) summarizes with a quotation, "an overall image of a place is formed as a result of both perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations of that place".

Sometimes a third dimension is added to the process, the *conative* component which is related to behavior and is often seen as an action component (Pike 2008; Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013; Marine-Roig & Clavé 2016.) The action usually depends on the image perceived through cognitive and affective components (Pike 2008; Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013). Pike (2008) summarizes the process as cognition being part of building or needing awareness, affect is developing alternatives after which follows evaluation and at last the decision as a part of conation.

Both Gartner's frameworks of looking at destination image formation are more or less based on Gunn's (1972) concepts of organic and induced images of image formation (Banyai 2012; Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013). According to this definition, *Organic images* offer information from unbiased sources with educational motives. It is formed from the tourist's point of view without actually visiting the place beforehand. *Induced images* are formed through promotions. This concept is specifically based on marketing material and focusing on selling destinations (Banyai 2012; Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013).

2.1.2 Destination Image and "Brand Confusion"

Mohd Ghazali & Cai (2013) and Sangsue (2014) claim that the image formation process has become more difficult because of globalization and the growth of technological aids as well as the growing pool of information that is not always tied to any particular location. There are lot of different sources of information communicated by DMOs and other companies, but also consumers including bloggers are spreading the word. Together they create an oversaturated buzz about places, things and services that cannot be seen anymore and in some cases create conflicting images that confuse the customer (Therkelsen 2015; Sangasue 2014).

Sangsue (2014) uses the term “brand confusion” referring to the state of mind of a consumer who tries to make a purchase decision and might have mixed images of two or several similar places or products. Destinations can be confusingly similar just by looking at pictures and without further knowledge of the destination (Sangsue 2014), for example telling a difference between Scandinavia and Nordic countries as well as differences between each of those countries (Hall et al. 2009). Sometimes consumers have an emotional attachment to a destination they have never visited and yet it is possible that the destination is mistaken from the actual place and location (Sangsue 2014), for example a person willing passionately to visit Thailand after having seen pictures of a beach or an appealing location, but the place is actually located in Indonesia.

Shani & Wang (2011) mention that changing the image of a place is a long-term project. The image starts to reform slowly when the new information is taken in and combined with the previous knowledge of the place. Pike (2008) claimed that it doesn't matter if the pictures given are true or false but the picture or perception that consumer creates is the reality to them and only that matters what consumers believe to be true. However, Hall et al. (2009) state that in order to be successful in delivering the marketing message, it should always rely on realities of the destination by connecting the message (software) to the actual geographical place (hardware) (Hall 2008).

2.2 Destination Marketing Strategies

The definition of marketing has changed many times over time (O'Malley 2014) and nowadays it states that

“marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and process for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society at large” (AMA 2013).

The nature of marketing has also changed. It has changed towards relationship-oriented strategies, network-based approach and a customer-centric value co-creation with the development of the Internet and technology (Hsu & Ou Yang 2013). Murray et al. (2016) state that the traditional marketing theory offers only a limited value for destination marketing purposes and that the messages are no longer under control of just one actor in the marketing field. As being mentioned, nowadays marketing is not focused only on the products anymore. It is much about feelings and experiences that are communicated through images in order to market intangible products, services as well as destinations which are highly depended on the perceptions and the co-creation of value and relationships (Singh et al. 2008; Gretzel & Yoo 2014; Pike 2008; Vargo & Lusch 2004).

The importance of interaction and relationships in business and in marketing is not a new phenomenon and relationship marketing dates way back in time. It was kind of reformed in the 1950's and 1960's when it got more attention and was noticed as a marketing theory in 1970's and 1980's (O'Malley 2014). However, it has gotten a new boost with new marketing sources, new media and “new” aims with marketing strategies. The traditional marketing mix of 4 Ps focusing on product, price, place and promotion in the marketing messages has experienced a paradigm shift. Birch (2011) has put together the main changes of the marketing ideology describing the change from 4 Ps to 4 Es and finally to 4 Rs that is illustrated in the table 1 (Gretzel & Yoo 2014). This model notices the changes of marketing strategies focusing on experience, exchange, everywhere and evangelism, towards social media marketing which again covers the strategies of building *relationship, revenue, reach* and *reputation*. However, Gretzel & Yoo (2014) state that the shift should not be exclusive in terms of marketing mix elements but an extended model of all marketing efforts adapted in a frame that meets the needs to reach right target groups.

Table 1 Marketing paradigm shift by Birch (2011 in Gretzel & Yoo 2014).

Classical marketing	21st century marketing	Social Media Marketing
Product	Experience	Relationship
Price	Exchange	Return on engagement
Place	Everyplace	Reach (based on relevance)
Promotion	Evangelism	Reputation

2.2.1 Social Media and Relationship Marketing

Recently, as the table 1 above shows, the focus of marketing has become more interactive, also involving consumers in the process of communicating the marketing messages in various ways. Social media marketing is highly dependent on relationships and communication as well as co-creation and content sharing by using interactive and social media (Gretzel & Yoo 2014). Collaborating with consumers, creating relationships, networking online and using (electronical) word-of-mouth are crucial tactics in order to benefit from social media in marketing purposes (Munar 2011; Li, Lai & Cheng 2011). Being able to spread information quickly and easily as well as targeting the potential consumers are benefits of using social media in marketing (Li, Lai & Cheng 2011).

It also about knowing your channels to reach the target as well as how to use those channels. The categories of social media vary slightly from researcher to researcher, but most often five main categories are involved as follows: blogs, social networks, content communities, forums/bulletin boards and content aggregators (Gretzel & Yoo 2014; Alizadeh & Mah Isa 2015). However, the definition is not totally complete because for example, microblogging is still missing from these categories even though it is one of the fastest forms of social media (Alizadeh & Mah Isa 2015; Uzunoglu & Misci Kip 2014).

Sharing information and involving the consumers in terms of discussion or content creation, are very common traits to social media. These main traits or factors create

one kind of a paradigm within social media marketing, since not the communication nor the content can be completely controlled by the marketing authors like for example DMOs. Marketing message can end up being positive and beneficial but also negative and even harmful for the business (Gretzel & Yoo 2014). Although, by just being active in social media is not a guaranteed answer to success in social media marketing, however it is still very important but the quality of content matters as well (Shao et al. 2012; Gunelius 2011).

Social media marketing is about collaboration and sharing, not only advertising and selling. It is kind of pulling consumers towards the brand by using social media tools such as blogs and social networks, fan pages etc. (Shao et al. 2012). The social media marketing law by Gunelius (2016) has ten points to pay attention to in order to design a working social media marketing strategy. The law consists of listening, focus, quality, patience, compounding, influence, value, acknowledgement, accessibility and reciprocity (Shao et al. 2012; Gunelius 2016). Many of these points were also mentioned by the key note speakers at the ITB Berlin. In addition, trust and authenticity were stressed by many key note speakers in order to get the message through as well as have a working collaboration.

As mentioned already, social media marketing relies in relationships which can be defined as a collaboration where both parties accept their dependence on each other for joint benefits (Fyall 2014). Fyall (2014) uses stakeholder theory as well as networking theory to describe the nature of the collaboration. Point is that both parties are achieving the goal together, which would not have been possible alone, and also there is no need for a 'network competition' if the network can be shared. Collaboration is also often more cost-effective option than working alone even though oftentimes working alone would be the preferred way of doing things (Fyall 2014).

O'Malley (2014) states that collaboration is not always only positive, it can also be manipulative and hierarchical. Firms are often embedded in networks and that is why they are trying to find trustworthy and ethical partners in order to co-create value and get the most out of the relationship (O'Malley 2014). Collaboration can be established between competitors, suppliers and buyers or actors from different industries, also long-term relationship or just short one-time projects are possible

scenarios (Fyall 2014). Consumers are also affecting the nature of marketing by sharing their, both good and bad, opinions and experiences openly (in social media) which takes away the power of control from the company but allows it still to participate the discussion which makes the network and the information flow multi-directional (O'Malley 2014).

Relationship marketing can also be described as a social process focused on exchange in terms of value creation for customers over time, as well as having the focus on relationships and interaction with stakeholders (Hsu & Ou Yang (2013). Two different approaches to relationship marketing is discussed by Hsu & Ou Yang (2013). First one is market-based approach that is about direct value-communication between buyers and sellers. The other one again is network-based approach that is covering a more holistic view of the market relationships and connections in networks.

Pan & Crotts (2012) present social network theory as a way to determine the importance and the structure of a network by using five different factors. The focus within this theory is in relationships (links) of actors and objects (nodes). The theory can be used to analyze complete networks or just parts of it and determine the type and importance of the relationship between actors (Pan & Crotts 2012; Hsu & Ou Yang 2013). Social network theory can be useful in identifying influencers (Li et al. 2011) in order to collaborate and make connections with them as well as get in touch with consumers and forward the brand messages. For example, the social network theory was used to find influential bloggers from blogospheres by analyzing their social network structures from blog sites (Li et al. 2011).

2.2.2 Influencer Marketing

The embedded users or actors in social media are also called influencers. They are people who are active in using different kind of social media networks and blogs, participating in the content creation by sharing their opinions and stories, evoking discussions and spreading word-of-mouth. Bloggers can also be called as (digital) influencers (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip 2014). In fact, 86% of influencer were active in blogging according to Technorati (2013). Text was the most common way to share information but using pictures and micro-blogging were very common

methods of communication as well (Technorati 2013). Even though blog posts (texts) are not as fast way to publish as micro-blogging is, text is more permanent and can be returned to later in the search of information (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip 2014).

Connectors, mavens and salesmen are the three main types of influencers listed by Brown & Hayes (2008). Connectors are described as networkers and connection creators. However, often their role is overstressed depending heavily on if the connections created are useful or not. Mavens again are looking for new information and also sharing it forward. They have a good eye in noticing trends. At last, salesmen are the ones with negotiation skills and the ability to persuade and influence opinions and decisions. Many other roles of influencers do exist, to mention only few, for example in the decision making process, there are idea planter, trend setter, scoper and validator. In many cases, the roles can be overlapping and the same influencer may have several roles or some roles might not be needed at all (Brown & Hayes 2008).

As mentioned influencers have many roles and that is one reason why they are often seen as opinion leaders and as trusted spokespersons (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip 2014). In addition, to participate in content creation, influencers are efficient message mediators because of their ability to reach a large amount of people through their different communication channels and tools provided by social media (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip 2014). Influencers gain their influence from each other, and they are often well-connected within different kind of social groups, networks and online communities that share similar values or identities (Brown & Hayes 2008; Liu et al. 2015). Liu et al. (2015) mention that the power of the influencers is also linked with trustworthiness as well as competitiveness in a way. Keeping up with what is new and happening is also important in order to maintain the status of an influencer (Liu et al. 2015).

Common way to measure the influence power of especially digital influencers, is to follow the numbers of followers, likes, views and comments as well as number of shared posts or retweets etc. in social media (Li et al 2011). The numbers vary a lot depending on the channel but in general higher numbers tend to create trust among other readers and users. Li et al. (2011) list that sites with higher popularity,

interesting content, citations and comments as well as active up keeper / blogger, get more attention which increases the influence power. Uzunoglu & Misci Kip (2014) state that trustworthiness is the greatest source of power of bloggers. They also acknowledge benefits of a wider reach by using different social media platforms as well as being innovative and social (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip 2014). Anyhow, Brown & Hayes (2008) remind that numbers are easy to fake which means that only a high number of followers is not really increasing persons influence power even though it might seem like that from the outside.

It is also noted that not all influencers are influencers to everybody. Liu et al. (2015) mention the fact that being influencer and expert on one domain doesn't make you an influencer in all the domains. Gunelius (2016) and Shao et al. (2012) claim that it is better to focus quality over quantity and use interesting content over continuous promotions to build a relationship with influential actors, or readers depending on the case. Both Sepp et al. (2011) and Liljander et al. (2015) mention the need to understand the motives behind the blog in order to be able to use it for marketing purposes. It means that marketers who wish to co-operate with bloggers need to first understand the "driving forces" as well as the main interests of bloggers to be able to offer suitable propositions that fit bloggers' themes, motivations and the content of the blog (Liljander 2015; Sepp et al. 2011; Li et al. 2011).

3 Previous Research

This chapter discusses the findings of previous research in order to present the background information about blogging in general, but also about the motivations and ethics in regard of commercial activities that has been a topic of discussion especially in the field of travel and life style journalism. Also the “business” side of blogging possibilities in marketing purposes are presented through previous research cases.

3.1 Blogging Motivations and Ethical Rules

To explain what motivates bloggers and keep them writing has many dimensions. Motivations are often build up from unfulfilled needs or wants, hence blogging can be described as task or goal oriented activity (Sepp et al. 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2011). These motives can also be seen as gratifications that evolve and change over time, which is one reason for having many blogs at the same time or changing and starting up new blogs to fulfill different “needs” (Sepp et al. 2011).

Gratifications by Sepp et al. (2011) can be sorted into three groups: process, content and social gratifications. These categories fit well together with the basic motivations to blog that Liao et al. (2011) and Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2011) presented in their studies such as documenting person’s daily life, providing commentary and opinions, expressing feelings, articulating ideas by writing and maintaining community forums as well as searching information. To mention few more, entertainment, social interaction, passing time and professional advancement as well as escapism came up with literature reviews by Pan et al. (2007) and Sepp et al. (2011). Such motives as sharing and revealing information have been stated to be most common reasons for blogging by Hollenbaugh (2010).

In addition, some new topics were found such as entertaining and enlightening others as well as promotion and advertising. Entertainment and enlightening others

was explained to motivate to improve and change something, not only to inform. Promotion was seen as a way to speak up about subjects that really mattered to the bloggers and had a great importance to them. Advertising was not as important as other motives but it came up as a new option linked to blogging (Sepp et al. 2011).

Self-disclosure and creativity are also mentioned often in discussion of blogging motivations (Cheng 2014; Hollenbaugh 2010; Liao 2011). Chen et al. (2014) state that blog writings show personal style and the personality of the writer, which is understandable since blogs are personal journal-like narratives. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2011) agree with Chen et al. (2014) by stating that most blogs focus on personal opinions and experiences, and the way they see themselves. In the study of Hollenbaugh (2010) the extent of disclosure in the blog content appeared to depend on the purpose of the blog as well as the targeted audience. The most disclosed blogs were usually targeted to friends and family or just in purpose of keeping a personal diary (Hollenbaugh 2010). Sepp et al. (2011) mention that blogging can also be seen as a way of self-branding and presentation.

3.1.1 Ethics and commercial influences

The influence of commercial activities and marketing, has been a topic of discussions in terms of ethics of journalists in the field of lifestyle and travel journalism (Harcup 2014). As mentioned above, promotion and making money has been noticed as a motivation to blog, also blogging and journalism share similar traits. The problem with travel journalists and commercialization is the fear of losing the trust of the readers and the credibility as a journalist if advertising has too much influence on one's work (Hanusch et al. 2015). At times especially travel journalists are quite dependent on the sponsorship from tourism industry. However, journalists have said that they don't let free trips or "freebies" (free products or try outs) influence their work and that they write their true opinion in any case (Hanusch 2010; 2011). In the study of Hanusch (2011), journalists with longer experience and formal education were less worried about free trips or gifts influencing their work than newer journalists or the ones who have not any formal training. As a reason it was mentioned that journalists can stay neutral and be objective in their work because of the education they have (Hanusch 2011).

However, blogging cannot be assimilated directly with journalism. Rosenkranz (2015) states his opinion quite straight forwardly that anybody can be a blogger but not a journalist. One of his journalist interviewees mentioned the importance of being an expert of what you do and knowing the history, the technique and the background of your field. Most often, blogs are UGC, and bloggers behind the text (or video or audio etc.) are just normal people, meaning not professional journalists. Anyhow, readers often see them as specialists or experts of their field of interest, and as a trusted source of information (O'Connor et al. 2011). It has been acknowledged that often bloggers lack certain skills and training like for example reporting objectively and double-checking the sources. Instead, they tend to write about their own interpretations and observations about things that matter to them by disclosing and sharing personal information and opinions and starting conversations as mentioned within things that motivate bloggers to blog. By doing this, bloggers have reached quite an important role of influencer next to mainstream press (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2011).

In the study of journalistic influences on blogging showed that especially in the case of political blogs, the more motivated bloggers are, the more accurately they tend to use references and check the sources as well as make corrections to stories in case of mistakes or receiving new information (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2011). Hanusch (2010) acknowledges also the development towards online publications and the increasing popularity of citizen journalism. Not sharing as critical opinion as Rosenkranz (2015), Hanusch (2011) raised the question of when in the future bloggers could be defined as part of journalists.

Anyhow, many of the popular bloggers have partners and sponsors and some of their posts involve product reviews, sometimes sponsored, sometimes not (Liljander et al. 2015). Blogs can also be connected to commercial sites or some platforms, blogospheres or websites of magazines, and in such collaborations, blogs may be affected by commercial guiding or so (Bosangit 2012). Generally speaking, bloggers are asked to notify readers about their forms of co-operations and sponsors especially when they receive a compensation, but not all do (Liljander et al. 2015; Hwan & Jeong 2016).

In the study of Walden et al. (2015) about American bloggers' behavior in terms of co-operation with companies and getting compensations from reviews showed variation of different stand points. Some of the bloggers were not fully aware of the customs of having lot of advertisement, some said directly that accepting compensations from companies is unethical and some said that before accepting such an offer they make it clear that they want to maintain the power to say the truth about the product even if they would not be happy with it. Majority of informants said they didn't accept any forms of payment for reviews and part of informants said that they send the products back or give them to readers after the review is done (Walden et al. 2015).

Archer et al. (2014) found that among Australian "mom bloggers" most did not get any compensation for reviews or mentioning brand names but most of informants would like to get paid. Most of them also saw no ethical issues in blogging. Those who did see ethical issues, mentioned the cases of co-operation with companies and issues in being transparent when posts are being sponsored and when the blogger has been paid to say something. It was mentioned in the same study that there is no official ethical code for bloggers in Australia and that they are somewhere in the grey area of being professional and personal (Archer et al. 2014).

In the study of Walden et al. (2015) the ethical policy had been renewed in USA and it states that bloggers who make endorsement have to be transparent and say openly when a post is being sponsored or nominal compensation has been received, the same way public relations professionals do. Similar rules are established also in Finland (Liljander et al. 2015) and in South Korea (Hwang & Jeong 2016) where bloggers are asked to be transparent in terms of sponsors and marketers and disclose if some products are received from companies for the story or if money has changed an owner.

Hwang & Jeong (2016) found out that the way of disclosing the information about sponsored posts may effect on readers' perceptions and the credibility of the blogger. They found out that a disclosure with a mention that states that the opinions are authentic had a positive effect towards the post and the source was seen more credible. The difference was bigger among those who have higher skepticism towards advertisements than those with lower skepticism. They (more skeptical

people) also responded more negatively to the posts with only a simple disclosure or no disclosure at all. In this light it was stated that truth in advertising has a persuasive power. However, mentioning also some negative aspects didn't make as clear difference in comparison with mentioning only positive things in the blog post. However, ad skepticism played its' part in a way that more skeptical readers responded more positively to two-sided messages because people with low ad skepticism tend to believe one-sided messages as well (Hwang & Jeong 2016).

According to Walden et al. (2015) there are rarely comments or reviews about a "bad" products or notes if they would buy the product in real life even though they claim to speak out objectively. One informant said declining reviews because he or she didn't like the product (Walden et al. 2015). Another informant who was concerned about ethical issues in blogging said: "You're doing the post and you have received some benefit, so be honest with yourself that your opinion has been influenced" (Archer et al. 2014, P. 46). Hanusch et al. (2015) mentioned in a study of journalism ethics and commercialization that almost as a thumb rule, journalists rather don't say or write about bad experiences than give a story about what not to do and fail in entertaining the readers.

3.2 Blogs as a Tool for Destination Marketing

Blogs can be connected to all kinds of social media which makes their ability to spread information fast and easy all over the world making it at the same time accessible to wider audience. Blogs have turned out to be a popular and appreciated source for searching information and also to compare others' experiences and read peer-reviews (e.g. Sepp et al. 2011; Volo 2012). In fact, blogs were ranked as third-most influential digital source after retail and brand sites (Technorati 2013). When looking into influential sources in making travel purchase decisions, IPK International (2015) listed blogs as second most important source after review sites. Blogs are trusted to provide more authentic information based on personal experiences (Vrana et al. 2012) and they are seen as more trustworthy source since direct communication from enterprises often focuses only on positive factors in order to promote a product (Volo 2012).

Studies about influences of blogs and social media have claimed that they offer good updated, real time information and feedback of tourists' perceptions and experiences of their travels, and also that they serve well as a source of data for further research of tourists' images of places and also function as a quality measure for the DMOs (e.g. Munar 2011; Marine-Roig 2014; Bosangit 2014; IPK International 2015). Bosangit (2014) stated that blog writings should be looked at as reshaped brand images communicated by bloggers. Çakmak & Isaac (2012), among others, listed blog posts as beneficial for word-of-mouth which, according to them, has a great influence on destination image formation. Li et al. (2011) state that the blogs are "huge word-of-mouth-engine" and that's why advertisers have found blogging useful in their purposes.

Dobele et al. (2015, p.1089) states that "effective blogs generate comments and feedback", also the feature of two-way communication that blogs offer is noticed as a good way to co-create value in order to build credibility. In addition, stories in blogs help creating an overall image of the destination and possibly to reduce pre-purchase doubts by sharing experiences and clearing the picture of the place (Çakmak & Isaac 2012). Singh et al. (2008) also claim that the involvement of consumers in the marketing process can be helpful to overcome consumers' resistance towards traditional marketing media. However, contradicting messages from many different sources can be also harmful for businesses in terms of creating "brand confusion" that was already discussed before in the chapter two.

Blogs with great number of followers or readers are a great interest to marketers because a large audience leads to higher traffic on the site even though the first intentions of blogging may lie in leisure purposes (Sepp et al. 2011; Liljander et al. 2015). Many blogs co-operate with companies and most common way to promote things are recommendations, usually through blog content by bloggers writing about the products. Also having banners or ads on the website and having links in the posts are marketers' ways to get publicity in blogs and through blogs (Liljander et al 2015). However, reader's level of ad skepticism affects the factor if the message is seen as credible or not. Also the way to communicate the involvement of sponsorship makes a difference (Hwang & Jeong 2016). Often, blogs created in

commercial purposes such corporate and governmental blogs tend to be biased and not as trusted source of information as private blogs (Volo 2010).

Munar (2011) and Bosangit (2012) talk about the possibilities of blogs and tourist created content (TCC) as a part of destination marketing. Official slogans, destination logos and other official marketing signals are usually not mentioned in the blogs created by tourists (Munar 2011); instead they give much more personal and more detailed information about their experiences in the destination throughout the whole journey (Bosangit 2012). Marine-Roig (2014) and Betancor García et al. (2012) have the same lining when mentioning that narrative blogs are seen as a believable way of sharing experiences, as well as peer reviews are often trusted information that can affect a purchase decision. However, suppliers, advertisers and other actors are linked to social media as well, and sharing their messages to consumers. Online content, the information shared and received, cannot be controlled by any particular actor only (Mohd Ghazali & Cai 2013).

Blogs can be effective in destination marketing or marketing in general not only as a marketing place and a communicator of marketing messages but as already mentioned as a source of real time feedback and customer opinions (e.g. Munar 2011; Marine-Roig 2014; Betancor García et al. 2012). Banyai (2012) says that marketing positioning depends on the gaps between consumers' perceptions and current positioning strategies, and blogs offer good data to be analyzed and influence the marketing message and the destination image (or the product) in that way. However, Govers (2015) has a point, that monitoring social media gives easily the perceptions of the opinion leaders only which is not necessarily the overall image.

4 Research Methods

This chapter talks about the empirical study conducted in order to find out answers to the proposed research questions concerning bloggers' influences on destination images and also the impact of commercial features from blog posts.

4.1 Research Approach

This study is a qualitative case study about the role of travel bloggers in destination image formation in Iceland using an inductive approach. A qualitative study is usually trying to understand a phenomenon more deeply by looking for "what is going on?". Often qualitative study is focused on smaller number of cases and aiming to find more detailed answers (Silverman 2013). Golafshani (2003) describes qualitative research as any kind of research that is not achieved by statistical means. Bryman (2012) describes qualitative research as well comparing it with quantity by noting that qualitative research tends to be about the words not the numbers.

Silverman (2013) and Golafshani (2003) present qualitative research more often through naturalistic approach and Bryman (2012) again focusing constructivist approach. Naturalism focuses on factual characteristics of the object of the study when constructionism looks how things are socially constructed (Silverman 2013). Bryman (2012) states that constructionist position sees things as an outcome of (social) interactions between people instead of looking at things separately from their constructional base. Howell (2013) state that constructionists see reality as locally constructed and based on experiences shared by different kinds of people who can change and develop. Those two are probably the most common ontologies within qualitative research when using interviews as a main source of data. However, preferring one over the other depends on what you are looking for.

The definition of a case study is not very simple either, it has to be about something, a case study of a phenomenon (Czarniawska 2014; Silverman 2013). Case study as a term is often misinterpreted as a field work in general as well as a qualitative research model. Case studies can be both qualitative and quantitative in nature and be based on secondary data (Czarniawska 2014). Case study is often used in comparative studies, but with intrinsic cases, the depth of the analysis matters more than the “area” it covers (May 2011), usually it does not even try to generalize over the single case presented (Silverman 2013). Silverman (2013, p.138) says well that it is better to say “a lot about little”. The basic idea of a case study is that one case (or few cases) is studied in detail by using most suitable methods for that particular case. Keith Punch (1998 cited by Silverman 2013, p.142) says that case study is about “to develop as full an understanding of that case as possible”.

This case study is focused on a single case of Iceland by limiting the case to look into bloggers possibilities to influence Iceland’s destination image. In other words, the case is drawn to cover Iceland as a tourism destination as well as a geographical and cultural area. This study uses the constructivist point of view having interest in what is going on but also “how social realities are produced, assembled and maintained” (Silverman 2013, p.107).

Constructionist approach has a social stress on how things are communicated even by having different voices to create meaning to all the time changing reality and the interview data is seen as stories or narratives describing informant’s world (Silverman 2013). There is critique to the naturalist point of view about ignoring how people create meaning in reality and not taking into account the ability to interpret the world (Silverman 2013). That is why constructive approach is preferred over the naturalist approach and the analysis is conducted following the traits of qualitative content analysis in the form of thematic analysis.

The same way destination images are socially constructed and personal, this study looks into bloggers’ personal opinions which are socially constructed in their everyday lives based on their culture and background, so their interpretation of the world cannot be ignored. However, the way how they communicate their answers during the interviews (body language, pauses, intonations etc.) have been left out

and the focus is on the message still not ignoring their ability to interpret the world like Silverman (2013) mentioned.

4.2 Interviews

Interviews are claimed to be one of the most used methods in social science research (Bryman 2012; Czarniawska 2014) and it is often referred as a type of conversation where two people exchange views and opinions of a certain topic (May 2011; Czarniawska 2014). Oftentimes, the researcher still wants to find out facts, the matter in question or things outside from the interview, also making the interview setting not very balanced when the researcher does the questioning and the informant gives the answers (Czarniawska 2014). However, in an optimal case “interviews yield rich insights into people’s biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings” (May 2011, p.131).

In this case study, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method because of the flexibility and the ability to have a conversation with the informant as well as probe with the questions, change order, ask some extra questions by feeling the mood of the informant and just see where the discussion leads. Also, the interest here lies in how bloggers see their possibilities to influence destinations images as well how their influence is seen from the aspect of DMO. May (2011) says that semi-structured interviews let people to answer questions freely but still preserving the possibility for comparison of answers between different informants. The benefits for semi-structured interviews are flexibility and possibility to change the order of the interview guide as well as to ask follow-up questions (Bryman 2012). Also the interest in semi-structured interviews is much more focused on interviewee’s opinions (Bryman 2012) and the answers form quite easily into narratives if the informant is given some time to reflect and follow the idea behind the answer (May 2011; Czarniawska 2014).

The main empirical data was gathered by conducting nine semi-structured interviews with individual travel bloggers (C2C blogs) in order to get a deeper understanding of the research topic and also be able to answer the two proposed research questions. Four more “interviews” were collected via e-mail because of

the request of the informant due to their difficult timetables. These responses can be classified as open-ended self-completion questionnaires (May 2011) because there was no face to face meeting nor actual conversation since all communication happened through e-mail. However, informants received the same questions (including some possible follow up questions as well) like all the other bloggers and answered the questions in written format.

One interview was conducted as a pilot study to test the interview questions at the ITB Berlin on 9.3.2016 with a travel blogger who had visited Iceland and written about it in her blog. This interview was unfortunately not recorded due to such high background noise in the exhibition hall that made the recording quite impossible and useless. Instead, documentation of the interview relied on hand written notes during the 45 minute-interview which was transcribed later the same day when it was still in fresh memory. The pilot study was very useful in order to edit the final interview questions in terms of deleting some unimportant questions and changing wording in some others. The visit to the ITB Berlin 2016 in general also gave some ideas for few interview questions mostly based on the information and opinions from the ITB convention lectures and panel discussions about influencers, marketing and destination image creation during the trade visitor days (9.-11.3.2016).

Seven of the interviews were conducted in Reykjavik, Iceland during the time of 28.-30.3.2016 meeting the informants in person. All these interviews were recorded after having a verbal consent of the interviewee and transcribed after focusing only on the text, leaving out pauses and onomatopoeic sounds etc. (Czaraniawska 2014). Interviews were ranging from 48 minutes up to 1 hour 31 minutes. Three other interviews were conducted from Helsingborg, Sweden by using Skype. All three interviews were also recorded with the verbal consent of the interviewee and transcribed writing down only the text the same way as the other interviews. These interviews took from 53 minutes up to 58 minutes. Four other e-mail responses were received after the semi-structured interviews were collected. These responses are treated as supplementary data because they were gathered without actually speaking with the informants which gives the main stress to the data gathered from the actual interviews.

Gathering of informants was done by contacting them with e-mail by sending a request letter for the interview. Contacted persons were found by using google search engine with different combinations of main key words of “Iceland” and “travel blogs”. Different languages such as Finnish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian were used. One blog was found through a blogosphere called Bloglovin’ and in addition, two bloggers were contacted because of the recommendation of another interviewee. All the interviews were conducted in English except two that were held in Finnish because it was the first language of both parties.

All the semi-structured interviews were conducted by using an interview guide. Two slightly different sets of questions were prepared as a frame and a guide line for the different kind of interviews (see appendix 1). Most of the informants (10/13) are bloggers who live in Iceland or have lived there for a while, and three bloggers have visited Iceland. The interview questions are also divided into four categories of background information, general questions, commercial factors and connections and influences and destination image. Also few extra questions focusing only on the blogger’s travel to Iceland were asked from those who live outside Iceland (see appendix 1).

4.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis of this study was conducted by using thematic analysis, or classic content analysis (Guest et al. 2012). Bryman (2012) says that thematic analysis is the most common way to analyze qualitative data because often finding themes and categories are seen as coding, and finding themes is used in other analyzing methods as well. In some cases, thematic analysis is referred to matrix framework in order to synthesize data (Bryman 2012). Guest et al. (2012) say that thematic analysis is about seeing patterns in qualitative data and with an inductive view reading and rereading the material to find key words, trends and patterns that will outline the analysis. Important matters in defining themes is to look for repetitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing things or theory-related material. Themes are also

said to be identifiable categories from the data that build codes and are related to the research focus (Bryman 2012).

Guest et al. (2012) mention many different possibilities to continue the analysis but being creative and using personal techniques in analyzing the data is very much encouraged. However, I used structural coding as a grounded guideline to my analysis following the structure of my interview guide writing down the codebook notes to make it clear when to use which coding.

Before starting the analysis, all the informants were renamed in order to guarantee anonymity and also to make a difference between different transcripts. Four main themes were set according to the interview questions' main themes which are background information, general questions, commercial factors and connections and influences and destination image. Coding was made actively when reading through the interview transcripts and writing down the code book to be clear which codes means what and when to use them following the example of Guest (2012). The transcripts were recoded after the first reading to fill in possibly missing codes that came up later on and check that coding is systematic in all interview transcripts.

As a result of the analysis and coding, themes were grouped under three main themes reflecting the 4 themes based on the questions. First group is "Profile" which covers the background information and mostly general questions describing the content, style and blogging motives and activity. The second group is "Actions" covering quite vastly the questions concerning collaborations and connections with readers, "colleagues" (other bloggers) and companies. Also taking notice to blogger networking and being connected to other forms of social media and for what purposes. The last group is "Influences" which assembles the themes concerning the blogger's possibilities to influence other people (expectations, opinions, decisions) as well as destination images not forgetting the marketing aspect and tourism in the destination. Groups and most important themes are presented in the figure 1 below.



Figure 1 Thematic analysis groups (Author's creation).

4.4 Credibility and Ethics of used Methodology

Critique has been expressed for qualitative research methods of not being objective enough (researcher as interpreter), about qualitative studies are difficult to replicate (changing situations), the generalizations are not very reliable with small samples and there is a certain lack of transparency with the research methods (Bryman 2012). However, there are ways to improve the credibility of a qualitative research.

What comes to credibility of this study, Golafshani (2003) refers credibility in depending on the instrument and in qualitative study the researcher is the instrument. When talking about credibility of a study, the terms reliability and validity are often used. It has been said that reliability would be irrelevant concept in qualitative research. However, a counter statement exists that there cannot be validity without reliability (Golafshani 2003). These terms are most often connected to quantitative research methods and that is why other terms to describe the same things are proposed for qualitative studies such as trustworthiness and credibility.

Trustworthiness can be seen covering terms such credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability by Golafshani (2003) and Bryman (2012). Two first terms are comparable with validity, third one with reliability and the last one with objectivity (Bryman 2012). Generally speaking, reliability is referring to the

quality of a study and meaning the stability of a study (Mrs. Elin Bommene1 & Mrs. Malin Zillinger, personal communications, 10 March 2015) or the degree of consistency (Silverman 2013). Validity again is about the truthfulness, the accuracy of representativeness and the accuracy of our interpretations (Silverman 2013) as well as it shows if you have studied what you wanted to study (Mrs. Elin Bommene1 & Mrs. Malin Zillinger, personal communications, 10 March 2015).

In addition, as already mentioned, staying objective is not easy when the interpretation is completely depending on the researcher and that is why it is very important not to let any personal opinions and values to affect the study (Bryman 2012). Also, representativeness affects to the quality of the study by questioning the truthfulness of informants' responses, if they really mean what they say or not. In case they are lying, the data would not present the true situation (Silverman 2013).

Interviews were chosen as the main source of data to provide deeper and more detailed information about the role and importance of bloggers from their own point of view. It felt like questionnaires would have limited the informative and reflective form of the answers. Also, only analyzing the blog content would not have given the insights of ideas and opinions behind the text. Moreover, many of the other previous studies have been focusing on those methods, analyzing existing blog content or having a quantitative approach. Providing information through different methods can contribute the knowledge creation and give some new aspects what comes to travel blogging and destination images.

As already mentioned the stress is on the interview point of view when the interview data frames the focus on this one single case of Iceland. As an example Silverman (2013) says that case studies don't aim to vast generalizations, likewise this study is not aiming to make generalizations. It is about if bloggers themselves feel being able to influence and if their messages are being listened based on their personal experiences in the case of Iceland. It is a small sample of informants with quite a random selection of whoever that fits the informant criteria and is willing to participate. The aim is to see the influence of bloggers in one specific setting, narrowing down from the bigger picture based on the theories and previous research

looking into what bloggers think of their abilities to influence others in terms of creating destination images.

What comes to objectivity and repetitiveness, it is not easy to stay 100 percent objective when as researcher you are so deep in the process, however all the efforts were made to stay neutral and not to let any personal opinions to affect the work. Also, during the data collection, the aim was not to lead informants to give certain kind of answers. In few cases some questions needed re-explaining to make the purpose clearer to the informant. There is no 100% certainty either that all the informants gave totally honest answers and opinions during the interviews but the data is handled in having the presumption that they were telling the truth in order to be able to present my case.

In every research, ethical issues, in the relation with truthfulness of a study, arise and they are defined as a situation where researcher has to decide how to act within the standards of morally right and wrong (May 2011). Rose (2012) states that research projects should take into account six ethical key points that are:

1. Ensuring integrity, quality and transparency;
2. Everybody involved in a research project should be fully informed about all the aspects (methods, purpose, possible risks etc.);
3. Respecting confidentiality and anonymity;
4. Participating must be voluntary;
5. No harm done to any participant during the project;
6. The research must be independent or any conflicts must be clearly stated.

In this study, the purpose of the study and the methods used were explained in the same e-mail when contacting informants and asking them to participate to my study by giving an interview. A verbal consent was made concerning recording of the interview and the anonymity of the informant after agreeing to participate to the study. The only informant who is mentioned by name is the representative of Promote Iceland from the DMO interview because he was presenting the company's point of view, and again, a verbal consent was made in agreeing that I was allowed to mention him by name in my study. All the informants were also

promised to be provided with more detailed information at any time concerning my study if needed.

5 Case Study Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical study by first representing the case of Iceland with some background information gathered from the representative of Promote Iceland Mr. Daði Guðjónsson as well as from the ITB Berlin 2016. The analysis reflects the data that consists of nine semi-structured interviews and four open-ended self-completion questionnaires answered by bloggers who write about travelling and Iceland. Also, findings are reflected in order to answer the two research questions.

5.1 Case Iceland

Iceland is a small northern island nation with a population of only a bit over 300 000 people and they are having more than one million tourists per year at the moment. Promote Iceland is a public-private partnership and one of their goals in making Iceland more competitive country is promoting Iceland as a tourism destination (Islandsstofa 2016). One of their ongoing campaigns is Inspired by Iceland that started out as a crisis management tool in 2010 after the huge volcano eruption of Eyjafjallajökull. The idea of the campaign was to tell everybody that everything was fine in Iceland and it was open for visitors. The campaign was launched very quickly using people to spread the story of Iceland. They had some celebrities involved talking about Iceland and social media came into the picture for the first time. The start-setting was to have a 2-month-campaign but after getting very positive results, campaign was prolonged and is still going on with different themes every year (Mr. Daði Guðjónsson, personal communications, 29 March 2016).

Promote Iceland's focus with the messages describing Iceland are involving six categories that are adventurous, pure, creative, cultural, sustainable and mysterious. They also want Iceland to be seen as authentic, energizing, joyful, welcoming and

surprising. Their core message and a guiding line for what they do puts together many things about Iceland that they think is true and what they want to tell people:

“Iceland, it’s not for everyone. It’s not for those who go where everyone else goes, it’s not for conservative and expected traveler. It’s for those who travel the world to experience something different, to come back with stories to tell and secrets to share. Stories of Iceland don’t stop as the winter comes, every season, and in every region Iceland offers secrets to the adventurers and enlightened traveler. So welcome to all those who come with the spirit of adventure, exploring and creativity. It may not be the first place you think of traveling in this season, but it will be the first place to tell your friends about. Come and be inspired by Iceland.”

Because of the successful start, the campaign got more attention and was developed with different themes and aims for each year. The aims have been to develop the perception of the country, to even out the seasonality of tourists as well as spread tourists all over the country by raising awareness of different regions and activities during different seasons, and generally to grow travelling in Iceland in a sustainable way. The latest aim is to educate travelers of different cultural habits as well as safety issues that every visitor should know in order to get more out of their trip.

As mentioned above, the base of the campaign relies in involving people and using social media, influencers and PR to spread the message. As being a small country, they do traditional marketing in some specific markets, but that they are depending on people to talk about their campaigns and they need to think carefully how to spend their marketing budget. They have also started using films (filminiceland.com) in the marketing in 2014 since there are many films and series have been filmed in Iceland. Inspired by Iceland was also a campaign that brought the whole tourism field together and it was the first time they have a coherent message that all the actors use.

The marketing strategy of Iceland’s DMO is very much social media oriented and it was said to be the most important channel to reach people and spread the word, which happens organically as well when visitors do it by themselves. Mrs. Inga Hlín Pálsdóttir was presenting Promote Iceland in a panel discussion at the ITB Berlin 2016 and she told their experiences of how digital transformation has

affected their campaign and how special skills of handling digital and social media are important in tourism marketing. What also came up was as Mr. Daði Guðjónsson mentioned that involving locals and tourists to spread the word organically is a powerful message mediator.

Tourist board used to have a blog called 'Iceland wants to be your friend' run by the DMO but it has been inactive for several years now. As a replacement for the blog they use Tumblr as kind of a replacement for the blog and use it as a content hub where they can drive people with other channels of social media. Another way to spread the message is co-operating with bloggers and influencers. Collaboration happens most often in terms of press trips or events where bloggers are invited to.

Marketing and PR agencies help the DMO to find the right influencers and events etc. that fit into their objectives. It was said that bloggers are not told what to say or write but they are informed of the campaign hashtags and are encouraged to use them if they feel like sharing something. This is because Promote Iceland want the picture of Iceland to be authentic and they don't want to have an image of buying stories when "we don't have to" as Mr. Daði Guðjónsson said it (personal communications 29 March 2016). He also mentioned Iceland being a dream land of photographers which helps the organic spreading of word-of-mouth and it helps in creating good quality content that is real. Pictures and video are a powerful way of communicating messages, and lot of video content is used in the campaign.

5.2 Thematic Analysis

Several themes came up through coding and some patterns started to form within different sections of questions and some quite common opinion could be seen like for example in regard of ethics of blogging being transparent, keeping integrity and honesty in what is published and not accepting just any kind of collaborations as well as of the uses of social media were brought up with quite common opinions. Some topics divided opinions bit more like if co-operation with companies and monetizing the blog is "good" or "bad" thing. Also if profiling to be a professional blogger is about making money with the blog or having a professional style and background used in blogging for example.

The sample of informants of the interviews consists of seven bloggers who live in Iceland of which four of them are originally Icelanders. One has family roots in Iceland but has grown up elsewhere like the other 6 bloggers. Generally, all apart from one blogger are blogging by themselves. Occasional guest bloggers or borrowing pictures from friends were mentioned but the general publishing is their own. Most often interviewed bloggers had only one blog. Two mentioned having a personal blog at the side and one said having four blogs. Two informants mentioned also having separate travel sites that they don't count as blogs. Blogging time varies a lot from two years to over 10 years. It was also common to have changed or started up new blogs and the newest blog in this study is only 5-6 months old.

The blogger status was not that easy to determine like Sepp et al. (2011) mentioned that there are no real definitions made between corporate or professional and hobbyist bloggers. All the bloggers in this study are individual bloggers, and most of them were considering making money by blogging to make blogging as work or becoming a professional blogger. However, being a professional blogger and having blogging as a job did not go perfectly together. Four informants said being amateurs, three professionals and five semi-professionals. One said being both amateur and professional basing it to blogging not being his job but still being a journalist as a profession. Only one blogger said blogging being her job in counting the blogging time in her working hours. Three others said blogging being a part time job and six said blogging being just a hobby. Two said blogging being more important than a hobby but not job either and one said blogging being a "free time job". Follower numbers were not that easy to compare when not all were aware of their current situation and also ways of counting followers varied a lot depending of the channels.

As presented in the method chapter (figure 1, presented here below as well), themes were gathered in three groups (profile, actions and influences) following the order of the interview guide (appendix 1). The groups and themes are reflecting bloggers' influencing possibilities and motives behind blogs since nowadays blogging has become a trendy phenomenon and making money by blogging has become more common. Next all the groups are presented separately and the findings are reflected with proposed theory and previous studies. At the end of the chapter a framework

is presented in order to structure and explain the image formation process with the findings.



Figure 1 Thematic analysis groups (Author's creation).

5.2.1 Profile

Themes such as content, style, motives; ethics and activity were gathered under the profile group in presenting the personality of the blogger, his or hers motives and reasons to blog as well as the type and style of the blog content. What came up in every case apart from one interview is that bloggers said always telling the stories from their own point of view. Only one blog is focused on reporting what is going on in Iceland with very neutral style. Many of 12 other bloggers referred blog being kind of a diary as well even though some mentioned having also completely personal blog in the side but most cases blogs were said presenting bloggers personal opinions and stories depending a bit of the style of the blog. Most bloggers said blogging about travelling and their personal life having their everyday life as a big influencer what comes to blog post topics. One blogger said writing a lifestyle blog but because her lifestyle is travelling a lot, travels come up as a strong topic in the blog as well. Another one described blogging being “a window to Iceland through his eyes” and another one claimed that being personal is the idea in blogging and that blog will not become that successful without a personal touch.

Blogging styles are also varying from more traditional travel blogs that are sharing useful information to visitors and giving tips for what to do etc. to blogs that share more personal stories. Also the differences between local bloggers and bloggers visiting the destination came up within the interviews. It was said that locals tend to share deeper information of the destination when visitors are covering most often travel information based on their visit.

For quite many informants blogging started as way of sharing things and keeping in touch with friends and family. With time reasons have developed blogging has got more motivations such as online publishing, writing and sharing photos, sharing (travel) information, inspiring others as well as getting inspiration. These motives fit quite well to the findings from previous researches. Previous research by Sepp et al. (2011) had gotten some results connecting the possibility of making money as a motive to blog. As mentioned in the beginning four bloggers said blogging being at least a part-time job meaning they are making some money by blogging. However, none of the informants said making money would be a main reason for blogging. It was mentioned that counting blogging in the working hours makes it easier to blog actively and update it more often but not as the only reason. Few bloggers said hoping to monetize the blog and make blogging as an income but it was said not being easily done, still not affecting the will to write the blog.

Making some money or having collaborations was mentioned as a nice profit on the side but most bloggers have another job as well or then having blogging just as a hobby. In most cases making money with the blog was connected to collaborations with companies and promotion. Having companies involved was dividing opinions more drastically and in some cases in a bit contradictive way as well when bloggers said not wanting to promote anything or involve companies but wishing to have an income by blogging.

However, it was generally agreed that being transparent and honest is an important factor in blogging in regard of keeping the credibility and trust in the eyes of readers, especially when collaborations or sponsors are involved. Also using own pictures and basing the stories to personal experiences were seen important and truthful. One blogger said that it needs to come from the heart. It was mentioned that readers notice when it is not real. One informant said blogging only when she has something

to say. Few informants also mentioned that readers feel like they know you after following the blog for a while and the most loyal ones are often alert if there is something “wrong” with the posts, for example badly timed posts or if some content doesn’t fit to the style or values represented in the blog.

The blogs in this study fit well into the basic definition of blogs without meaning that they are all the same. However, the most useful way of communication with blogs was said to happen by writing and sharing pictures as well as videos even though there were no vloggers in this case study. One informant is focusing mostly sharing photos, wanting to evoke feelings through pictures. Also using own pictures and own experiences was almost a standard assumption. Writing about places not visited personally said to happen mostly only as pre-travel inspiration sharing plans and dreams. Otherwise guest bloggers were noted to be good way to share more information about the things when lacking personal experience.

5.2.2 Actions

Themes such as collaborations, monetizing the blog, connections, tools and social media were gathered into the second group with the title of actions. Some of the themes such as collaborations and monetizing the blog were discussed a bit within the first group because these themes were seen as a part of bloggers’ ethics and style as well. Only three informants said not having any collaborations and like to keep the blog free from commercial factors. Few bloggers said not liking to promote stuff so they don’t do collaborations that much. However, the opinion among informants was that having co-operation with companies in general is ok as long as it is open, transparent and honest. It was stressed by many that it is important to be a bit picky when choosing partners and companies and to think through that it fits to the blog. It was also said that it is not worth lying in the blog to promote something that they don’t like because readers notice it.

There are differences in style and way of doing co-operation by blogging. Those who considered blogging as a part of their job had more structured and clearer picture how collaborations work between bloggers and collaborations for example in terms of payment and what is the objective of the collaboration. Those who considered blogging as a hobby were fine by accepting discounts or free try-outs as

a compensation for the content collaboration (blogpost). One of the informants who counts blogging into her work day mentioned that blogs are media space the same way magazines and newspapers are as well, and blogs are one possible way to get publicity for companies.

“Blogs are media spaces that have readers and to reach them costs like in any other media, you can’t take a front page of a big news paper and pay it with pizzas.” (D).

The same way she mentioned that bills won’t get paid with stuff you get for free. Another informant who defined her blogging as a semi-professional activity said that based on her experience the form of payment depends often on whether the collaboration is more desirable for the company or for the blogger. Advertisements like banners on the blog, affiliate links were mentioned as other ways to make an income besides content posts. Also free product or trip try-outs, give-away products to the readers and discounts with travel companies were mentioned in connection with company collaborations. As a counter comment one informant said about blogs getting too commercial that *“it’s sad when you see something brilliant but then it just tries to sell you something all the time” (G).*

What comes to the style of sponsored posts, few bloggers said that companies often expect to get some favorable comments. One blogger said that that is why he don’t want to do collaborations because he could not be critical when the company expects to hear something nice. It was also said that in a case there is not that much positive to say bloggers would rather send the product back and leave it out from the blog than write about something you would not recommend the same way Hanusch (2011) found from his research of travel journalists. Despite that, few informants said that at times it is important to talk about negative side as well.

Also collaborations with tourism boards and DMOs came up but only few informants had experience of such a collaboration. Usually this kind of co-operation is sponsored press trips that Promote Iceland mentioned using as a part of their marketing strategy as well. However, most of the local bloggers felt that the tourism board of Iceland could do “better” and involve local bloggers to their campaigns as well. Informants raised an interesting point whether a well-known blogger who has lot of readers and followers is a better match in comparison with local bloggers who

is more focused on the topic. For example, is a celebrity blogger more useful for a tourism board by posting few stories of his or her trip than a local blogger whose main topic is Iceland in order to reach the people who are looking for information about Iceland?

What comes to other connections with blogs, apart from companies, are those often different channels of social media, blogospheres and blogger networks. Among the informants in this study most popular connections were different forms of social media. Most used platforms were Facebook and Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and Pinterest were mentioned as well. Most often social media was said to function as a useful tool to drive people to your sites and promote updates on your blog as well as get feedback and interact with people. It was mentioned also that partner companies often want to be tagged in social media as a part of collaboration. As it was said in the case study introduction hashtags (#) are good way to spread information in social media. There was only one blog that was not connected to any other media or platform wanting to keep the blog “old school”. Blogospheres within this study were not seen that important. One said being part of one community to learn more. Another one said such networks giving a lot of peer support and help when needed. In two cases blogosphere were also working as a partner in order to help with different connections in terms of collaborations etc.

In addition, as simple as it is, the most effective tools to mediate the message in blogging was mentioned to be sharing stories by writing, using pictures and/or videos and telling personal experiences. It seems very obvious but connecting simple methods with good connections, right channels and inspiring environment can make something happen. Anyhow, this was already discussed quite thoroughly within the blogging style and motives as well.

5.2.3 Influences

The last group, influences, is based on the themes of followers, expectations, feedback, destination image, tourism, responsibility and marketing. The most obvious and direct way of influencing for bloggers is through readers and followers. They can't speak for their readers but they can interact and speak with them, also getting feedback from the readers is a way to see the influences. All the informants

said feeling to be influencers, even though it would be for a small audience, because of the messages and feedback they have gotten from their followers. Blogs don't appeal automatically to everybody and one influencer is not an influencer in every case like Mrs. Catharina Fischer (personal communications 10 March 2016) at the ITB Berlin said that even celebrities won't work as an influencer if it is wrong connection. Influencers are influencers to those who care about the subject.

Bloggers can influence destination images by sharing their personal images and readers pick out things that appeal to them forming their own images and expectations. If someone is basing their whole picture on information from only one source like a blog, the influence might be greater in that case but it still is only one perspective. One informant said that it better to spent time in a place before deciding what to think based on a short trip, staying in one hotel, eating in few restaurants etc. Images can also change and sometimes get mixed up like Sangsue (2014) said about mixing images of destinations. One informant said that she tends to correct things if she finds wrong information online but that most of the stuff (in blogs) is good. Also it came up that the mind set makes a lot when visiting places and forming the images. It was mentioned how some tourists come to Iceland without any plans and think that Northern light can be just "switched on" and might get disappointed if everything is not that easy. However, most comments from readers were mentioned to be positive and grateful.

By sharing their experiences, it is possible to influence someone else's expectations and presumptions of a place, trip or a product. This in mind especially local bloggers mentioned the responsibility, and the need to inform people coming to Iceland about all the possible dangers and things to be taken into account when planning the visit. Also one informant raised the point of responsibility as a blogger, recommending things and places to visit, to think about "*what is there for sale*" (B). To think about if naming and placing the spot on a map to everybody is worth it, if the place can take the possible tourism. She used as an example the swing in the water in Bali where people go take a beautiful picture when there is a line behind waiting to take the same picture.

Marketers getting interested on blogs was said to be a good way to make some extra money but none of the informants in this study was payed only for the writing and

blogging per se. Roughly half of the informants said that blogging has helped them to get other (writing) jobs but often not as a blogger in those cases. As mentioned before none of the informants said only blogging to make money, some said wanting to present Iceland to visitors by offering useful information but they are not marketing Iceland for somebody else nor for some company. The general voice was to present places like they are, from their own perspective. In this case study, collaborations were most often, seen as possibility to explore more when Iceland is an expensive country to travel which was noted by few informants. Mr. Daði Guðjónsson (personal communications 29 March 2016). said about Iceland not wanting to “buy the image” but let people talk about it and spread the word organically.

5.2.4 Analysis Framework

To go back to the theme groups and the image formation, if the themes are seen as a whole within the groups, they can be seen functioning simply and linearly in the image formation process as illustrated in the figure 2. That way the blogger’s personal profile controls his or her actions and actions again have an effect on the possible influences that affect readers as the end result.

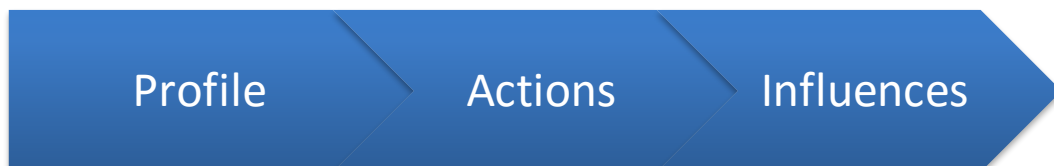


Figure 2 Linear influence (Author’s creation).

In this sense bloggers can function as organic image creation agents by Gartner’s model by being personal and honest and using previous experiences in their stories shared. If blogger is involved with some sort of collaboration with companies, they could also be seen as covert induced agents mediating (partly) promotional messages in the role of a trusted spokesperson. Like this depending on their profile as a blogger, they make decisions how to communicate their messages, and what

kind of messages they are sending out, for example if they want to get involved with companies or not (organic vs. covert induced). As a result, readers and followers decide how to take the information in, either being influenced by the blogger or not. This as well depends on how critical or skeptical readers are against sponsored posts and how trusted the blogger is seen to be.

As a second option, these theme groups can also be looked at in a multifunctional way as shown in the figure 3, where all three groups are connected and they all effect each other, which can be seen from the overlapping themes in different groups. In an optimal case, the middle point, where all the circles cross each other, could be seen as the most influential blogger whose personality and profile meets with his or her actions and is proved to work through the influence made. It could also be seen as a most influential blog post that is found useful and appealing by readers without contradicting bloggers personality, values and style.

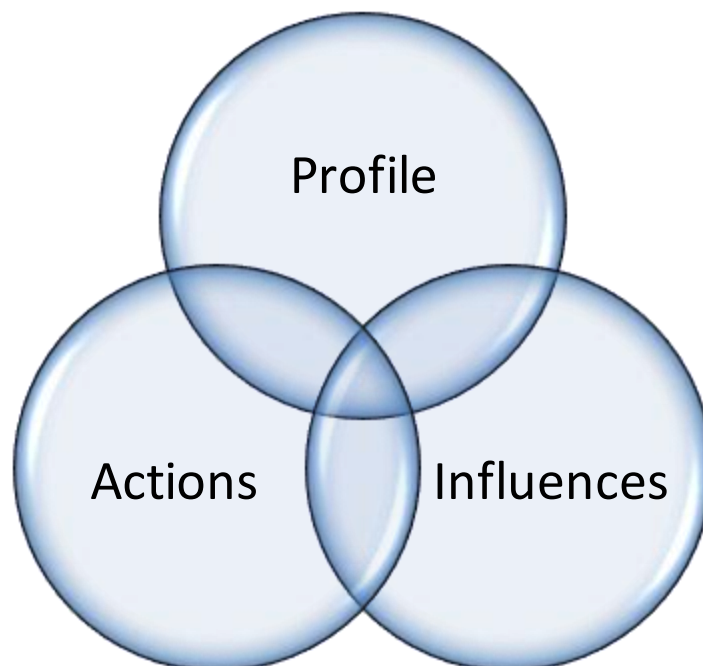


Figure 3 Multifunctional influence (Author's creation).

In relation with destination image formation, the framework of the figure 3 could be related to Gartner's other model of cognitive, affective and conative components. This way blogger's profile and actions would appeal to reader as cognitive and affective components by evoking feelings and sharing stories, experiences and

information when the possible influences would take the conative component's role. Also if the influences make the reader take action in visiting a place, the conative component would have affected reader's behavior and made him or her to travel.

From the marketing perspective as Hsu & Ou Yang (2013) mentioned relationship marketing can be approached from market-based point of view or network-based point of view. In this case Influencers could be placed in the network-based situation working as connectors, mavens and even salesman, according to Brown & Hayes' (2008) roles for influencers, by making contacts, searching and sharing information and even influencing readers' opinions and decisions. Also when mirroring the situation to Birch's 4 Rs, bloggers and influencers are the relationship creators with a certain reach through their channels. They have a reputation based on what they do and how they do it. They also keep on communicating and interacting with their audience all the time.

6 Conclusions

To summarize the findings of this study, bloggers can influence the destination images by mediating destination image formation messages. They can do this either by playing the part of organic image creation agents or depending on their style and motives, in the role of covert induced agent if sponsors or companies are involved. The most effective ways to participate the image formation process were sharing personal stories and experiences as well as using pictures. This way bloggers can evoke feelings and share information appealing to the cognitive and affective components in the image creation process. It was claimed within the interviews that Iceland's nature is one big profit to make word-of mouth spread organically by people sharing pictures of the beautiful landscapes. It was also noted as important to be open and honest with the communication especially if there are companies or commercial interests involved.

How strong the influence is, depends on the size of the country or destination. It was mentioned that bloggers have stronger influence over smaller places and countries like Iceland. Anyhow, even a small influence was considered important as long as it is genuine. Also the blogger's influence power depends on his or her audience and the size of it. Social media was told to work as a useful tool to drive people to visit the site and reach people. Social Media was also noted to be useful to interact with people as well as to get feedback from followers.

Suggestions that came up with previous researches did not match that well with the findings of this study. Previous researches suggested that bloggers can affect marketing messages through DMOs by sharing their opinions and that way DMOs get feedback by monitoring travel blogs and comments. In the case of Iceland, Promote Iceland told co-operating with bloggers by inviting them to participate press trips time to time but monitoring blog content was not mentioned. It was said that PR offices are helping the DMO by searching and suggesting influencers that fit their purposes, but the type and style of blogger or influencer was left a bit open

since according to Icelandic bloggers tourism board could improve their activities by involving more bloggers in their campaigns.

The findings show that blogs can be used for marketing purposes and that many bloggers have collaboration with companies and sponsors. In this study three out of 13 bloggers did not have any commercial co-operation. That means that destination image received from travel blogs might be influenced by commercial motives. However, the question how much commercial influences effect the destination image depends also the style and ethics of the blogger by choosing whether or not to disclose the collaboration and how honest the opinions shared are. As stated several times in this paper, destination image is personal. The reader must also think what to believe because as stated earlier there are lot of information available online and not all sources are up to date or offering correct information.

In the case of Iceland all informants said being honest is important and that they are not trying to sugarcoat anything. They said telling how things are from their point of view whether it is a culture shock from visitor's point of view, happenings of a family's daily life or a road trip in Iceland. All the informants are also individual bloggers meaning there was no corporate blogs included to this study. Bad weather and the dangers of certain places were mentioned in order to inform and educate visitors because they felt it is important. Also the blogging motivations came from different reasons than only making money even though monetizing blogs has become more common as can be seen from this study as well. However, in this case monetizing the blog was seen more often as a possibility to explore and travel more than market and promote something specific.

6.1 Limitations and Further Research

Like every study, this one too has its limitations. The small sample of informants restrict the conclusions and the generalizability. Most of the interviews were conducted during a short period of time in Reykjavik but it does not mean that the bloggers interviewed could not write about other areas as well. The purpose was to meet in person with all the informants but that was not possible with such a short time frame. Also as mentioned earlier, this study was not about making

generalizations but to see what is the role and importance of bloggers for Iceland. Like May (2011, 240) says “a single case study may provide the basis for an academic article or policy piece”. It can also provide interesting insights and value to its niche. Later on generalizations may be possible if the case is further studied and compared with other relevant cases (May 2011).

To agree with May, this study could be continued to cover Iceland more profoundly by interviewing more bloggers living in other parts of Iceland. Later on, the case could be compared with other countries, for example other Nordic countries, to see if they share similar points of view what comes to bloggers influences to destination image.

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Mrs. Inna-Pirietta Lahti, Chief Enthusiast & Founder, Innastus Ltd – Bloggers Experience.

Mr. Jan Schmirmund, Head of Social Media Marketing, Deutsche Zentrale für Tourismus.

Mrs. Malin Zillinger, University Professor, Lund University

Mr. Rob Holmes, Founder and Chief Strategist, GLP Films.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions

Blogger interviews

Background information:

Country of origin?

How long have you blogged?

How many blogs do you have?

How many followers/readers do you have?

What is your status as a blogger? (amateur, pro, etc.)

Is blogging a hobby or a job for you? to what extent? (hobbyist, corporate, part-time, fulltime, self-employed)

Are you sharing the blog with other writers?

General questions:

What are the main subjects you blog about?

How do you choose your blog post topics?

What kind of posts do you write? (e.g. reviews, tips, personal stories, promotional editorials etc.)

How would you describe your blogging style? (informative, professional, descriptive, narrative, journal etc.)

Why do you blog? What are your motivations?

What kind of things affect your blogging?

When you write the posts about destinations you visit? Before, during or after the visit?

Do you ever write about places without being there yourself? Why?

Commercial factors and connections:

Is your blog connected to other sources of social media? or blogospheres?

If yes, which networks and why?

What is your opinion about co-operation with companies?

Are there ethical rules in blogging?

What kind of?

Do you have partners, sponsors or commercial co-operation?

Do you have co-operation with Destination Marketing Organizations or other tourist organizations?

What kind of co-operation?

Is it paid or unpaid co-operation?

Do you tell in your posts when there is a sponsor involved or a commercial background?

How do you communicate that?

How do you get payed, if you do?

Do you get/ have you got benefits, gifts, discounts, special treatment etc. related to blogging (when travelling/visiting places)? if yes, for example?

Have you tried to get sponsors or partners? Why?

Have companies contacted you because of collaboration/promotion campaigns? if yes, what kind of projects and why?

What kind of feedback have you got concerning posts with commercial influences (from the company and/or readers)?

Influences and destination image:

Do you see yourself as an influencer? Why?

What kind of influence your blog has on your readers?

Have you got feedback about your blog influencing people's opinions or decisions? If yes, about what kind of influences?

Do you think about influencing people's perceptions about Iceland?

Do you have some specific motivations behind posts?

In your opinion, are your blog posts affecting Iceland's destination image or Identity?

How?

How could blogging and bloggers influence or participate in destination image formation process?

What do you think about co-operation between DMOs and bloggers?

Could that be beneficial for the destination? How?

How are you representing Iceland in the blog?

What kind of feedback have you got concerning visitors' perceptions of Iceland?

What about the experiences after visiting?

Blogger interviews – Visited Iceland

Background information:

Country of origin?

How long have you blogged?

How many blogs do you have?

How many followers/readers do you have?

What is your status as a blogger? (amateur, pro, etc.)

Is blogging a hobby or a job for you? to what extent? (hobbyist, corporate, part-time, fulltime, self-employed)

Are you sharing the blog with other writers?

General questions:

What are the main subjects you blog about?

How do you choose your blog post topics?

What kind of posts do you write? (e.g. reviews, tips, personal stories, promotional editorials etc.)

How would you describe your blogging style? (informative, professional, descriptive, narrative, journal etc.)

Why do you blog? What are your motivations?

What kind of things affect your blogging?

When you write the posts about destinations you visit? Before, during or after the visit?

Why?

Do you ever write about places without being there yourself? Why?

Commercial factors and connections:

Is your blog connected to other sources of social media? or blogospheres?

Which networks and why? /Why not?

What is your opinion about co-operation with companies?

Are there ethical rules in blogging?

What kind of?

Do you have partners, sponsors or commercial co-operation?

Do you have co-operation with Destination Marketing Organizations or other tourist organizations?

What kind of co-operation?

Is it paid or unpaid co-operation?

Do you tell in your posts when there is a sponsor involved or a commercial background?

How do you communicate that?

How do you get payed, if you do?

Do you get/ have you got benefits, gifts, discounts, special treatment etc. related to blogging (when travelling/visiting places)? if yes, for example?

Have you tried to get sponsors or partners? Why?

Have companies contacted you because of collaboration/promotion campaigns? if yes, what kind of projects and why?

What kind of feedback have you got concerning posts with commercial influences (from the company and/or readers)?

Do you write about negative experiences in the blog? Why?

Influences and destination image:

Do you see yourself as an influencer? Why?

What kind of influence your blog has on your readers?

Have you got feedback about your blog influencing people's opinions or decisions? If yes, about what kind of influences?

Do you think about influencing people's perceptions of a destination by blogging?

In your opinion, are your blog posts affecting destinations' image or identity? How?

How could blogging and/or bloggers influence or participate in destination image formation process?

Could that be beneficial for the destination? How?

About Iceland

Why did you travel to Iceland?

Were there sponsors or collaboration involved during your travel/stay? if yes, for example?

What did you want to tell about Iceland/your trip with your blog posts?

How did you choose the topics to write about?

Did you think about the influences of the blog posts concerning Iceland's destination image?

Were you trying to influence people's perceptions about Iceland? Why and How?

How are you representing Iceland in the blog?

What kind of feedback have you got concerning readers' perceptions of Iceland?

What about the experiences after visiting?