Role of stakeholders in the branding process of a destination

Case study: city of x

Abstract

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Abstract
The thesis examined how stakeholders can be successfully involved in the branding process of a destination. The city of x was chosen as a case destination as it was developing a brand at the time the study was conducted and the author was allowed to accompany this process.
The theoretical framework of the thesis was divided into the three topics of destination management, branding, and stakeholders. The secondary data was obtained from academic publications such as books, journals, and previous studies from credible sources.
The empirical study focused on who the tourism stakeholders in x are, why they should be integrated into the branding process, and what measures exist to engage them. Primary data was obtained through the author's participation in the branding seminars of x and through qualitative research based on three semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The results reveal that x's brand is created by a core team of six persons, the internal stakeholders. External stakeholders, such as professionals of the tourism industry, have no influence on the development of the brand and are only approached after the brand concept is approved by the mayor, the city director, and the city council.
The author concluded that a stakeholder management strategy is the first step for successful stakeholder integration in the branding process. On the one hand, this thoroughly identifies and prioritizes the stakeholders and, on the other, defines suitable measures for cooperation. Brand development should not be based on a "top-down" approach that only considers decision-makers and key players, but it should also include the perceptions of other stakeholders. Since this did not happen in the branding of x, a proper brand launch must now take place that comprehensively introduces the brand to the stakeholders.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Differentiating the destination from the competition and identifying its unique character are critical, both before the COIVD-19 crisis and afterwards. Before the pandemic, tourism was one of the fastest growing sectors in the world and the number of destinations continuously increased since governments realized the potential contribution of tourism to the local economy. Developing countries started to invest more in tourism and new destinations emerged, for example, from formerly closed regimes. Additionally, new tourism areas, experiences and even forms of tourism have been developed, such as space tourism. As a result, the number of destinations and experiences increased, which lead to intensified competition. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 4.)

Although this high level of competition has come to a temporary halt due to closed borders and travel restrictions because of COVID-19, successful differentiation will be even more essential after a long period of only limited tourism. Destinations will compete more intensely for tourists to restore the local tourism economy to pre-pandemic levels, while tourists will be able again to choose their destination from a multitude of locations.

Nowadays all leading destinations offer excellent tourism services, inherent individual culture, or landscape (Morgan et al. 2003, 285-286), while not many people consider the differences between countries and base their travel decision solely on their ideas of the destination (UNWTO & ETC 2009, ix). Consequently, traditional differentiators such as accommodations and attractions no longer exist (Morgan et al. 2003, 285-286) and a new way to obtain awareness and loyalty emerged to survive in the market. The new differentiators are strong brands that represent international competitiveness while being more resilient in crises. Therefore, it is essential to show the uniqueness of the destination through a consistent branding strategy. The destination brand reflects the competitive identity and the destination's personality – the essence and durable characteristics, the aspects that make the destination unforgettable and distinguishes it from the competition. To raise the interest of potential visitors, it must be omnipresent, whether it is in the marketing of the organization that manages the destination's tourism (the Destination Management Organisation) or in the behaviour of the people who are involved with the destination, also called stakeholders. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, ix-xix.)

For this reason, all local stakeholders must be involved in the branding process of a destination to ensure their commitment to the concept. They should be satisfied with the result of the brand, as it will represent them on the one hand and should be visible in all marketing

activities, i.e. those of the individual stakeholders, on the other hand to increase the brand's impact through consistency. Additionally, they are supposed to act as advocates of the brand in their behaviour towards tourists since this is one way how visitors encounter the brand. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, ix-xix.) However, including various stakeholders in the branding process is challenging as they perceive the destination differently and have other interests and visions for its development. Nonetheless, the various perspectives must be taken into consideration to create a common brand that reflects the true character of the destination and is fully supported by the stakeholders. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 37.)

1.2   Objectives

Despite the importance of involving stakeholders in the branding process, several authors noted the lack of research studies that included them and their engagement in destination branding (e.g. Wagner & Peters 2009). However, 91% of DMOs surveyed by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and European Travel Commission (ETC) in 2009 stated that they did engage stakeholders (either private or public sector, or regional tourist boards) in the development of the destination brand (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 149). This shows a discrepancy between theory and practice, which makes it an interesting thesis topic to conduct theoretical research on and to investigate the operational situation through a case study. Therefore, the thesis is to examine the role of stakeholders in the destination branding process using the case study destination x. This German city was chosen because it was in the process of developing a brand at the time the study was conducted. The objective of the thesis is thus to provide x's office for business, marketing, and tourism with a useful analysis of the city's tourism stakeholders and their engagement in the branding process.

Additionally, the thesis intends to increase awareness of the topic as successful branding after the pandemic will be crucial to attract tourists and overcome the crisis. Therefore, the theoretical part of the thesis introduces destination management, its branding and stakeholders, as well as the case destination x and its DMO to make the topic accessible to the reader. Afterwards, the thesis gives information about the empirical study before the results are presented. Lastly, it provides recommendations for further stakeholder involvement in the ongoing process, as well as after the establishment of the brand.

All this will support x to build a strong brand, with particular emphasis on stakeholders. This city must be aware of the relevance of its stakeholders to prevent their exclusion, and instead ensure their involvement during and after the process of developing the brand. In this way, they will support the brand and even act as advocates, which is crucial for strong

brands. Therefore, the aim of the thesis is to investigate the role of stakeholders in destination branding with the case study x.

1.3 Research questions

A research problem was defined to support the aim of the thesis to investigate the role of stakeholders in destination branding with the case study x: **How can stakeholders be successfully integrated into the branding process of a destination?**

To answer this still rather complex question, sub-questions were developed, which divide the research problem into several aspects:

1. Who are the stakeholders of the tourism destination x?

2. Why are stakeholders integrated into the destination branding process?

3. What activities exist to integrate the external stakeholders into the branding process?

1.4 Delimitations

Since the topic of destination branding is quite broad and a variety of problems could be discussed, delimitations are necessary. Hence, the thesis focuses exclusively on the aspect of stakeholders. Other steps such as destination or competitor analysis are neglected as they have been addressed by the branding team of the city and would go beyond the scope of the bachelor's thesis. The overall process of destination branding will only be explained briefly to be able to classify the stakeholders therein.

Additionally, even though the theoretical part about destination branding describes the topic in a rather general manner, the study concentrates on the city of x. Therefore, any conclusions about the city's stakeholders, reasons for their engagement, measures for their involvement in the branding process, and further recommendations refer to this particular city and may not be generalizable.

Furthermore, as the branding of a city is extensive, the thesis studies destination branding only from the aspect of tourism, which is why the stakeholders under examination are based in the tourism industry. However, the study does not consider tourists and focuses solely on professionals. This should simplify the research and allow clear conclusions by concentrating on one target group.

Lastly, the paper does not create a strategy for x's stakeholder management in the branding process. It rather examines the current situation of the stakeholders in the development of

the brand and subsequently proposes recommendations for the further procedure. This is intended to draw attention to the important role of stakeholders.

1.5 Research approach and methods

Many decisions must be made regarding the research methods, which contains the data collection and analysis depending on the research problem. Numerous approaches, strategies and methods exist for solving it, none of which is the only best, but instead lead to different results. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of the most suitable method for answering the specific research problem. (Saunders et al. 2009, 2.)

The data collection method can either be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative research aims to understand a particular situation through perceptions and feelings of selected people. The group of people targeted is small, as the situation is in a specific context and the research attempts to find explanations through interpretation. The data collection is mostly conducted by means of interviews, observations, personal experiences and case studies. Accordingly, qualitative research is about words and uses open-ended questions, while quantitative research is based on numbers and closed-ended questions. As quantitative research focuses on numbers and variables, data can easily be transformed into statistics. Moreover, they are generalizable and can be transferred to other populations. Data is collected from as many people as possible through for example surveys with pre-given response options. The aim of quantitative research is to verify a hypothesis, which is why the study goes into the breadth rather than depth compared to qualitative research. (Creswell 2009, 2; Stumpfegger 2017.)

According to Creswell (2009, 1), *a study <u>tends</u> to be more qualitative than quantitative or vice versa*. For this thesis, the qualitative research is applicable as the study seeks to understand the point of view from different actors. The relationship and interaction between the DMO and the stakeholders are examined in the context of x's branding process. Therefore, it was important to let them describe their opinions in an open-ended question interview rather than giving them pre-determined response options in a survey. The study aimed to better understand stakeholders' experiences, which made the qualitative method suitable for collecting information about interactive relationships, personal perspectives, and emotions.

The thesis combines secondary and primary data to solve the research problem and to answer the research questions. According to Saunders et al. (2009, 280) secondary data is *data that have already been collected for some other purposes, perhaps processed and subsequently stored*. It was used in the theoretical part that explained destination

management, branding and stakeholders by means of books, journal and magazine articles, and past studies. Moreover, the city x, its DMO and tourism industry were introduced by secondary data that were its website, location brochure, articles, and statistics. However, primary data was applied to describe x's brand. This was obtained by the author's participation in the branding seminars where she observed the participants' discussions and the overall branding process for the city's brand. Additionally, primary data was collected in interviews to answer the research questions. According to Kahn and Cannell (1957 in Saunders et al. 2009, 318), *an interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people*. Saunders et al. (2009, 318) further state that *the use of interviews can help you to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to you research question(s) and objectives.*

To examine the integration of stakeholders in x's branding process, the primary data was collected in three semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions through phone and video calls due to COVID-19. Semi-structured interviews are non-standardized conversations covering several themes and questions that might vary in the different dialogues and allow interviewees to explain their point of view. In this study, qualitative interviews were suitable to reveal reasons for decisions, attitudes, and opinions. (Saunders et al. 2009, 320-324.) A total of three persons were interviewed: the deputy of x's marketing and tourism department, the consultant who guided x's branding process and a brand designer. Next to their significance in the branding process, they were chosen as they work with brands regularly and have background knowledge on the topic.

After the data collection, the data was analysed to understand its meaning, which allowed to answer the research questions and draw conclusions. To analyse qualitative data, the first step was to prepare the data for the analysis, which meant to transcribe the audio-record with the exact words in a written report. Then, the researcher read the transcripts carefully to understand the data, which led to the recognition of keywords. This way, the data was coded, which included sorting it into categories, and relating it to another. Key themes were identified that lead to the research questions' answers and related conclusions. (Saunders et al. 2009, 489-492.)

1.6   Reliability of the data

Nevertheless, it is possible that data collected through semi-structured interviews may have quality issues related to reliability. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2008 in Saunders et al. 2009, 156), reliability refers to the extent to which your data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings. Especially in non-standardized interviews, it is questionable whether the same results would have been obtained in other situations because interviewer and interviewee bias are difficult to avoid. Interviewer bias occurs when

the interviewer's verbal and non-verbal behaviour influences the respondent's answer or limits the value of the information when trust has not been established. Interviewee bias describes the situation when the interviewee withholds sensitive data on certain topics, resulting in incomplete information. (Saunders et al. 2009, 326-327.)

Reliability was first tried to be established through a credible theoretical background. Therefore, secondary data were used from well-known authors and scholars who have good reputations in their fields. These were in particular Pike, Keller, and Jeffery, but also quotes from Freeman and Anholt, who are the most recognized names in stakeholder theory, resp. destination branding. Besides these rather older editions, the new revised edition by Morrison from 2019 was essential to confirm the accuracy of the theory. In addition, the author used information from renowned organisations such as UNWTO and ETC to gain an understanding of the topic's complexity and examined local articles from x as well as data from the Bavarian State Office for Statistics to establish a link to the case destination.

Furthermore, the author took several measures to minimize reliability. Thus, she provided the interview questions to the interviewees in advance. This allowed respondents to be aware of the themes and to prepare relevant information that would be asked. Through this and their participation in the branding seminar, they were familiar with the topic, and the research was based on their real-life experiences. Moreover, the interviewees were able to choose the most convenient time for the interview, which ensured that the interviews were not disturbed. They were conducted by video or phone call; therefore, interviewees were in their familiar environment and felt comfortable. To reduce the risk of bias, questions were clearly phrased in German, the native language of the interviewees, and were asked in a neutral manner to avoid biasing answers in any particular direction. In addition, only open-ended questions were used to allow respondents to freely express their views, however, more in-depth questions were asked afterwards if needed. (Saunders et al. 2009, 328-334.)

Although data of qualitative research is more interpretive and the results may not be replicable, the author believes the data is reliably as the academic guidelines of the theoretical framework were adopted to make the data collection and analysis as reliable as possible. Several people were interviewed about the same topics, which mutually confirms the general statements made by each person and the reliability of the data. Nevertheless, the study represents the current situation of stakeholder engagement, which is why different results may occur at a later date as the city of x moves forward in its branding process.

2 Theoretical approach to destination branding

2.1 Destination management

To stay relevant in a market with intensified competition, destinations must offer extraordinary experiences to provide value for their visitors. At the same time, tourism's impact on the local community and resources must be controlled to guarantee sustainability. Various factors and stakeholders with different interests are involved in the tourism industry that all shape the visitor's experience. Working together with a common goal is therefore essential to ensure the lasting success of the destination, which is why sophisticated destination management under the supervision of one organization evolved. (UNWTO 2007, Preface.)

2.1.1 Definition of "tourism destination"

According to Pike (2008, 2), *destinations have emerged as 'the fundamental unit of analysis in tourism' (WTO, 2002)* as *most tourism activities take place at destinations*. A tourism destination is a physical area that provides tourism products and attracts tourists for a temporary stay. It offers accommodation and tourism facilities, e.g. restaurants, entertainment, attractions, natural features, as well as supporting services such as infrastructure and transportation. Moreover, the destination is managed by an administrative authority and shows marketing efforts to attract visitors and to demonstrate market competitiveness, which is why people have a perception of the place and an image in mind. The size of the area is not important, as a destination can have any scale, ranging from a continent or country to a state or region, to a province or island, to a village, town, or city, to a resort or centre. (UNWTO 2007, 1; Morrison 2019, 4; Pike 2008, 24-25.) Pike (2008, 2) also describes a destination as *a place at which visitors temporarily base themselves to participate in tourism related interactions and activities*.
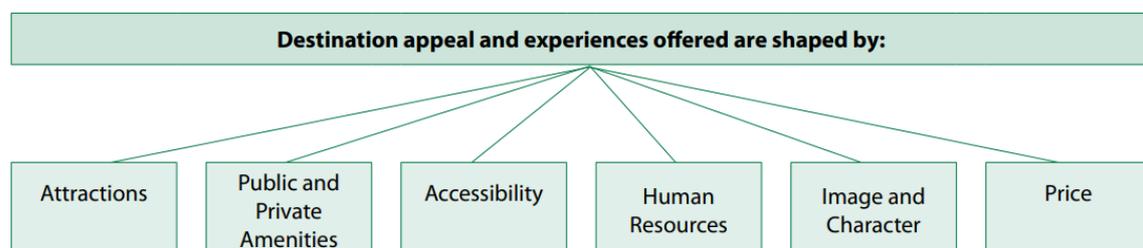

Figure 1. Destination experiences (UNWTO 2007, 1)

Several aspects influence the appeal of a destination and attract potential visitors. These are attractions, public and private amenities, accessibility, human resources, image, and character, as well as price (Figure 1). It depends on these elements if the tourist will choose a particular destination for a trip and how well it can satisfy his needs. (UNWTO 2007, 1-2.) A destination is therefore a complex entity, which is why several aspects must be considered to make it competitive. In line with Pike (2008, 42) *a competitive destination is one that features profitable tourism businesses, an effective market position, an attractive environment, satisfactory visitor experiences, and supportive local residents*.

However, to achieve a competitive and successful destination, sophisticated destination management implemented by a designated organization is fundamental.

2.1.2   Destination Management Organization and its role

Having defined the term destination, its management can be addressed. In many destinations, this is carried out by a Destination Management Organization (DMO). Effective organisation is necessary to demonstrate competitiveness in a highly competitive tourism marketplace. As tourism increased, so did the number of DMOs and the budgets of National Tourism Offices (NTOs). (Ritchie & Crouch 2000 according to Pike 2008, 42). Competitiveness could not be accomplished by individual stakeholders with isolated activities (Pike 2008, 42.), which is why DMOs were established to coordinate the planning, development, and marketing of tourism destinations (Morrison 2019, 5).

In the past, these organizations were called Destination <u>Marketing</u> Organizations, however, their role became broader than simply destination marketing (UNTWO 2007, Preface) that was composed of promotion, sales, and public relations (Morrison 2019, 6). Surely, promotion must not be underestimated to attract people first, but developing a tourism environment that ensures the quality of experiences is equally important to satisfy visitors' needs in the destination, which leads to positive word-of-mouth and repeat visitation. Therefore, DMOs evolved to leaders that develop the destination and coordinate all destination management activities by means of a strategy. (UNWTO 2007, Preface.) In this regard, the DMOs mission and vision are aligned with the long-term competitiveness of the destination and topics of concern are *coordination, strategy, stakeholders, economics, marketing, product development, lobbying, information provision, research, and the host community* (Pike 2008, 98).

To ensure a sustainable tourism destination where stakeholders have a common goal, a DMO has four main operations: leading and coordinating, marketing, creating a suitable environment and delivering on the ground (Figure 2; UNWTO 2007, 5).
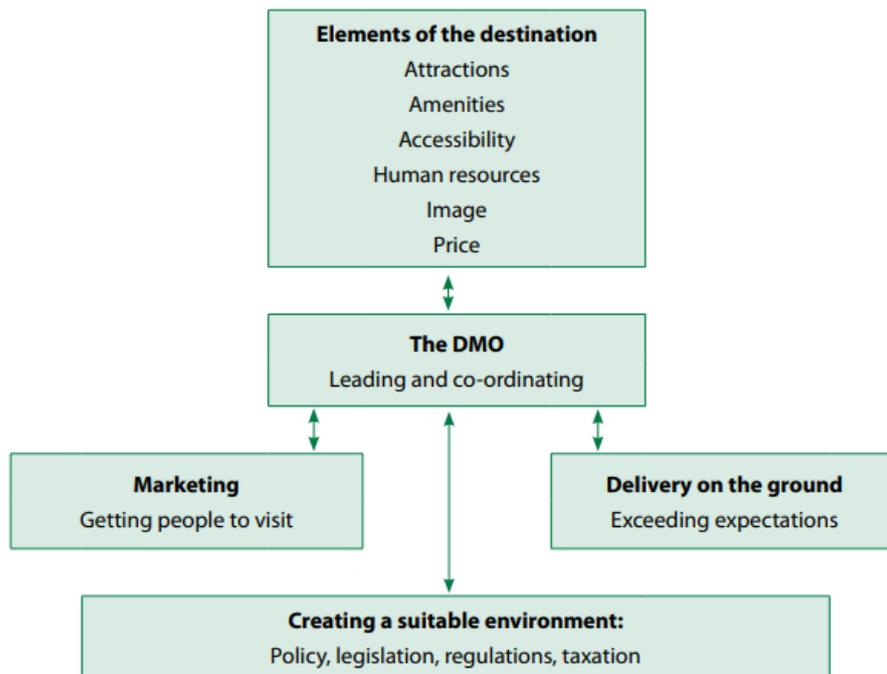
Figure 2. Destination Management (UNWTO 2007, 5)

The responsibilities are interrelated and start with the DMO bringing its partners and their expertise together rather than controlling them. The aim is to coordinate all stakeholders' activities under a consistent strategy to reach a predetermined tourism goal which is usually *to grow the volume and value of inbound tourism*, as well as *increasing visitor spending, tax revenues and employment* (Morrison 2019, 10). The aim of DMOs is to make tourism beneficial for the local economy, which is why leading and coordinating the different stakeholders is inevitable. Consequently, the DMO strives to ensure that the elements of a destination (attractions, amenities, accessibility, human resources, image, and price) are treated sustainably as they are the first motivation of tourists to visit the destination and satisfy their needs (UNWTO 2007, 5). In the matter of leadership and coordination, the DMO is also responsible for developing marketing ideas and programmes, investigating tourism trends, sharing these trends with stakeholders, providing tourists with information and assistance, as well as promoting sustainable tourism development (Morrison 2019, 10).

In addition to the elements of a destination, marketing activities aim to attract people to the destination. According to the UNWTO (2007, 5), these are *campaigns to drive business, unbiased information services, operation and facilitation of bookings and customer relationship management*. The marketing activities promote the most attractive aspects of a destination and face outwards to convince people to visit. However, Morrison understands the

responsibility of marketing and promotion as a more complex one that includes positioning the destination, creating a brand, and selecting target markets (Morrison 2019, 7). Main tasks in this regard are marketing planning, market research, market segmentation, marketing strategy, marketing plan, promotion, and communications, as well as marketing control and evaluation. (Morrison 2019, 18). This understanding is also reinforced by Pike (2008, 105) who claims that *establishing and defending an effective market position is one of the major aspects of marketing, since all marketing activity should be focused on strengthening the brand's presence in the minds of target groups*.

The next step is to exceed the expectations that tourists were promised in marketing (Morrison 2019, 5) by delivering excellent experiences within the destination. Therefore, the DMO must develop and manage attractions and events, provide training and education for staff, advise businesses, create strategies, conduct research and development, and generally manage the quality of tourist experiences. (UNWTO 2007, 5-6.) Satisfying the visitors' needs is the focus of destination management because positive visitor experiences affect future travels and positive word-of-mouth. This is achieved by monitoring service and quality standards, as well as promoting the development of new products. Product development plays an important role in providing excellent experiences as globalisation leads to similar tourism products and services in destinations which makes it difficult to distinguish them. However, this can be overcome by developing new products, packages, and events. (Pike 2008, 108-112.)

Excellent tourist experiences can only be delivered if there is a suitable physical, social, and economic environment, including policies, legislation, regulations, and taxation. It is the base of destination management and a complex process that must be driven and coordinated by an authoritative DMO that demonstrates leadership. According to the UNWTO (2007, 5.), tasks to create an accurate environment are *planning and infrastructure, human resource development, product development, technology and systems development,* and *related industries and procurement*. All these different aspects must be managed by the DMO to ensure sustainable tourism development in the destination (Morrison 2019, 5) since tourism relies on intact environmental and community resources. Ultimately, all stakeholders should strive for the sustainable development of a destination because its long-term success depends on it. (Pike 2008, 105.)

Sustainable development is also related to visitor management that seeks to protect visitors, residents, as well as local nature and culture. The DMO aims to maintain resources and high standards of safety, experience, and satisfaction by managing visitor impacts, behaviour, and tourism flows. (Morrison 2019, 17.) This is closely related to its responsibility to

conduct research and planning on tourist numbers and spending to determine performance and trends. Consequently, different tourism plans of long-, medium- or short-term perspective can be developed as *research is the foundation for strategic planning* (Morrison 2019, 11).

2.1.3 The challenges and advantages of destination management

Destination management is characterized particularly by *the importance of coordinating and balancing the needs of different groups of people* (Morrison 2019, 7). This is performed by the DMO that coordinates all tourism stakeholders to reach the vision and tourism goals of the destination. Through long-term strategic planning, effective destination management will be achieved. The results of these tourism efforts must be regularly tracked and evaluated to guarantee sustainable management of the destination product. (Morrison 2019, 8.) In an industry as competitive as tourism, the expectations of visitors must be exceeded to compete successfully. However, the experiences provided for tourists depend on many different services, which is why tourism stakeholders must work together as a unit while safeguarding sustainability and local benefits. (UNWTO 2007, 9.)

These aims entail challenges. The public, private and community sector must be connected to work together in cooperation and partnership towards a collective vision. This requires good communication skills to sell the ideas of the DMO and achieve consensus among stakeholders that have different priorities and interests. In general, the DMO must satisfy the needs of many different people that are not only tourists, but also the host community, local businesses, and travel agents. The local population must be integrated to profit from the benefits, and environmental, social, and cultural resources must be treated sustainably. Concerning economic benefits, one major challenge is to ensure that the generated income stays in the destination. Depending on the headquarters of airlines, hotels or international companies, large amounts of the visitor expenditure flow out of the destination. This decreases the benefits of visitor spending, as well as jobs in tourism and hospitality. In addition to the lack of control over the packages of intermediaries such as airlines, tour operators or travel agencies, the DMO has no direct influence of the products in the destination, which makes it difficult to control their quality. DMOs usually do not operate tourism services themselves but still are dependent on the satisfaction of visitors. Therefore, agreed quality standards in the destination should be established with the stakeholders. Similarly, DMOs are not involved in the pricing of services and facilities, even though the price level plays a major role in attracting tourists. Achieving a competitive advantage is demanding with so many aspects not manageable by the DMO. (UNWTO 2007, 11-12; Morrison 2019, 23-24; Pike 2008, 44.)

These challenges make the tourism sector unique. Nonetheless, as in any other industry, it is also *measured according to commercial indicators such as the number of businesses, the number of people employed and the output achieved* (UNWTO 2007, 3). Moreover, it depends on demand and supply, and is business driven. However, despite these similarities, the tourism industry is rather different from traditional businesses. Customers in tourism have, for instance, great influence in designing their products by creating their own travel package. Therefore, the product is not clearly defined, which makes sense in an industry where experiences are perceived differently. These experiences are influenced by several components and stakeholders, so no one has complete control over it. Furthermore, the profits of tourism products are distributed to many stakeholders. Tourists need accommodation, food and beverages, transport, and entertainment, which is why tourism benefits the entire economy. Even small and medium sized businesses have a chance in this industry as it does not require to produce in large scale, while providing access to mainly foreign markets and therefore, external expenditure. Additionally, this expenditure stays in the destination if services are provided locally. However, skilled employees are necessary to offer local tourism services, which is why the tourism sector is rather employment intensive. The local population benefits of this creation of jobs, while also the infrastructure improves to support tourism. (UNWTO 2007, 11.) Apart from the mentioned tourism businesses, other small enterprises can profit from tourism expenditure as well. Especially in rural tourism, visitors are interested in community-based products, for example, arts and crafts. This way, the benefits of tourism spread into the communities. (UNWTO 2007, 9.)

These overall benefits for the local population make it worthwhile to invest in effective destination management. But also other, more invisible advantages arise. To reach a competitive advantage, for example, the destination must develop a prevailing positioning by understanding the destination's unique assets. At the same time, it must ensure that the quality of the experiences is of highest standard. As a result, the competitive advantage will be based on strong partnerships and a common vision. Moreover, sophisticated destination development and marketing can increase the return on investment and yield per tourist. Tourists might stay longer, spend more, and visit the destination all year long, which reduces seasonality. In this regard, however, tourism sustainability must be ensured through sound planning and management to protect environmental resources, as they are the very reason visitors why visitors were initially attracted to the destination. Furthermore, DMOs aim to transform first visitors to repeat visitors, which can be achieved by offering exceptional value. A salient brand is therefore mandatory to differentiate the destination successfully from the competition. (UNWTO 2007, 9.)

2.2 Branding

2.2.1 Definition of "brand" and "branding"

The brand is a company's most valuable intangible asset. Achieving this requires sophisticated planning and marketing, as well as long-term commitment. Ultimately, however, a strong, consistent brand is rewarded with consumer loyalty. (Kotler & Keller 2012, 241.)

A brand is more than the simple product. While *a product is anything we can offer to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that might satisfy a need or want* (Keller 2013, 31), a brand is what makes the consumer choose one product over another one for features that can be *functional, rational, or tangible*, or *symbolic, emotional, or intangible* (Kotler & Keller 2012, 241). According to the American Marketing Associations (in Kotler & Keller 2012, 241), a brand consists of several brand elements such as *a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them* and is *intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors*. Brand elements can be very diverse, which is why a brand is all the characteristics of a product or service that distinguish it from similar offers. Brands live in the minds of customers and reflect their perceptions and ideas. Companies can only try to monitor these images by marketing activities that communicate the personality of the product. (Keller 2013, 35.)

Branding, in this regard, is the process of enabling the consumers to identify the product and teaching them the meaning of the brand: the reason why the product is unique, what it offers and how it is different (Keller 2013, 35). Branding *is all about creating difference between products* (Kotler & Keller 2012, 243) by giving them a personality – a name and other individual characteristics that make them seem unique and beneficial. Customers can identify themselves with the brand and project their self-image on it, which is why they will buy the product again and again to represent themselves. Branding can be performed anywhere there is market competition and customers have a choice between several options. This includes physical goods, services, stores, persons, places, organizations, or ideas. (Kotler & Keller 2012, 243.)

Nowadays, brands have a great significance for customers and companies. Customers might perceive identical products differently depending on their branding. Brands represent individual values, and over time, customers recognize which brands satisfy their needs, upon which they will base their purchasing decisions. Ultimately, brands impact consumer behaviour by simplifying buying decisions and reducing customers' perceived risk because they already know what to expect. Especially brands that meet the quality promise will win customers that are willing to pay a higher price and buy products repeatedly. This brand

loyalty has many advantages for a company, such as predictability and security of demand, as well as customer willingness to pay higher prices. Years of experience build a positive brand image and satisfaction with the brand, which eventually creates a competitive advantage that leads to more challenging barriers to entry for other companies. Consequently, brands bring various benefits to consumers and companies. (Kotler & Keller 2012, 242-243.)

Brands influence decision-making, which is why branding is omnipresent nowadays. However, due to this enormous number of brands, sophisticated brand management is essential as maintaining the position of a strong brand can be demanding. Additionally, challenges in changing market conditions can occur at any time, such as new technology, customer attitudes, competitive forces, marketing efficiency and effectiveness, and internal business dynamics. (Keller 2013, 49.)

2.2.2 Branding of tourism destinations

In a fast-living, busy and competitive world, branding is critical to raising awareness of a destination. The destination's best assets must be highlighted since people do not spend a lot of time doing detailed research on destinations, so potential visitors are most likely to choose a destination that they already have a positive perception about. In addition, the Internet overwhelms them with information about the increasing number of existing destinations from which they can choose from. Consequently, destinations must build a clear destination brand that makes them stand out from the competition and that highlights its main assets. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, xxvi)

In destination branding a brand can be described *as a unique combination of product characteristics and added values, both tangible and non-tangible. The characteristics have a relevance that is inextricable linked to the destination and awareness of this may be conscious or intuitive. The brand is not only a trademark (logo, strapline or icon), but an experience and image that signals a value system and positioning. In short, it is a PROMISE. It establishes the kind of experience that the visitor can expect from the destination.* (UNWTO 2007, 45.)

Accordingly, destination branding is *the steps taken by a DMO, in collaboration with its stakeholders, to develop and communicate an identity and personality for its destination, which are different from those of all competing destinations. Some experts also refer to a place's destination brand as its 'competitive identity'* (Anholt 2009 according to Morrison 2019, 375).

Destination branding is of great importance in tourism marketing as the industry is more and more recognized as an economic opportunity worldwide. The number of destinations with adequate tourism products increases, which leads to more choices for potential visitors. As a result, the development of a brand is inevitable to stay relevant (UNWTO 2007, 41.), which must be communicated to stakeholders and locals to ensure their support for the concept.

Branding contributes to many benefits for the destination: As with any brand, the aim of destination brands is to create customer loyalty to bind visitors to the brand's values and turn them into promoters of the destination. It emphasizes the uniqueness of the place and develops a competitive identity to differentiate the destination from the competition. At the same time, destination branding helps to develop an idea of the place and its experiences, which leads to less perceived risk in decision making for potential visitors. It raises expectations and makes a quality promise. Moreover, it improves the outdated perceptions among potential visitors, while increasing recognition and awareness as a tourist destination. This creates demand, which in turn strengthens the economic benefits of tourism, as well as community pride for the destination and the tourism industry. Furthermore, destination branding brings stakeholders together with the goal of gaining their support and creating synergies for the brand by inspiring them to incorporate the brand identity and values in their own marketing activities. Finally, branding forces DMOs to specify the target group and market segmentation to create a successful branding strategy. (Morrison 2019, 377-381; UNWTO 2007, 46.)

Nevertheless, destination branding is quite difficult and brings many challenges: DMOs have no control over the destination product that is branded since destinations consist of many different products and services. It is composed of different aspects such as attractions, events, facilities, transportation, infrastructure, service quality and friendliness, which makes tourism destinations very complex. Without adequate staff or infrastructure, for example, it is challenging to deliver the brand promise. The product is therefore not under control of only one entity, but several companies and stakeholders are engaged that might have different quality standards. Destination branding is a team effort of the DMO, tourism industry stakeholders, tourists, and community residents because the experiences offered in the destination should accentuate the created image. Another challenge is that destination branding needs long-term commitment as the results do not show immediately. A successful brand proves to be consistent and continuing over time. However, this is quite difficult considering that destinations have changing political leaders that also want to be involved in branding and political influence is crucial to obtain governmental approval for the brand. Similar to this, destination marketing and its brand are subject of public debate as

every local has an opinion on how to brand the place they live in, and some opinions might be very influential. In the worst case, the opinions of powerful stakeholders might lead to a lack of financial support for destination branding which makes it difficult to hire experts and to implement their recommendations. (Morrison 2019, 381-385; UNWTO 2007, 45.) Lastly, destination brands can easily be impacted by external crises that are impossible to control by DMOs. (UNWTO 2007, 45.) According to the City Nation Brand, there are several reasons for destination branding failures: no clear objectives, only short-term perspective, politically motivated, complexity not appreciated, lack of consensus, as well as insufficient funding, management, and implementation (City Nation Brand 2017 according to Morrison 2019, 386).

In contrast, there are characteristics and key features that successful destination brands share. It should be easily understandable, unique to differentiate the destination from the competition, and memorable to not be forgotten. The brand must transmit powerful ideas that inspire consumers, as branding is about addressing their emotions. The logo needs to be visually appealing to the target market, while the tone of the brand reflects the destination's personality appropriately. An effective brand communicates the experiences and values that visitors can expect, which creates expectations. These expectations must be met to prove the desired destination image to be true. For this reason, the brand should be tested in the market beforehand to ensure that it delivers on the brand promise. Moreover, the brand must be consistent with its positioning and aimed destination image, which is why it must be supported by adapted marketing activities. A successful brand must have the approval of all stakeholders since they should also use it to create synergies. (Morrison 2019, 386-387; UNWTO 2007, 46.)

However, in the study of Blain et al. (2005, 328-338), it became clear that many DMOs have a rather narrow understanding of destination branding and see it solely as the development of logos and slogans for merchandize promotion. Nevertheless, their reasons for creating logos are consistent with those for destination branding (establishing the desired image, giving the destination a label to increase brand awareness, and differentiating it from the competition), while they also understood the need for consistency to deliver the brand promise. In contrast, the study revealed that brands were insufficiently tested in advance to examine if they represent the destination, and the image statements were quite similar and did not provide a unique destination positioning. Next to that, DMOs did not track if visitors perceive the destination image as intended, but still assumed their success in creating the desired image. The study concluded that DMOs generally understand the concept of destination branding, but often fail to implement it.

2.2.3 Destination branding process

Nowadays, the only way to successfully differentiate the destination from the competition is to develop and represent a unique identity. (Morgan et al. 2003, 285-286.) This unique identity is the destination brand whose development is divided into six steps: brand strategy development, brand identity development, brand launch and introduction, brand implementation, brand monitoring and maintenance, and lastly brand evaluation (Figure 3; Morrison 2019, 402). The key tasks are to identify the brand's values, transmitting them into a pleasant personality and communicating that message to the target group. (Morgan et al. 2003, 285-286.)
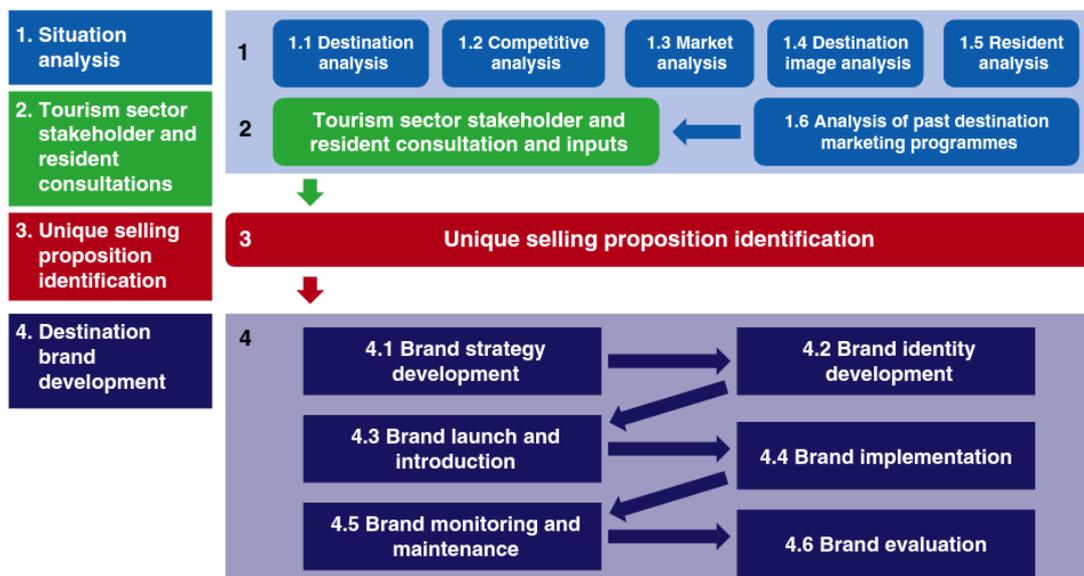
Figure 3. Steps in destination branding (Morrison 2019, 390)

However, before the brand can be created, the destination's current situation must be analyzed. The most important steps in this regard are the competitive and market analysis. The brand represents the character or identity of the destination, which is why the competitive position must be understood and unique brand values must be developed. To do so, the destination's closest competition must be examined through a SWOT and competitor analysis. This enables to reveal the destination's competitive position with its strengths and weaknesses and to gain insights regarding its differentiating features. Additionally, it must be measured to what extent the destination satisfies its visitors' motivation compared to the competition. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 37; 41.) Moreover, the key market segments and

customers must be identified as they are *the main audience for a new destination brand* (Morrison 2019, 390). A destination offers several experiences that attract different market segments, but despite this, destination branding should focus on key markets. They are the main target group for consumer research on which results the brand values will be created. This way, the brand will have a strong impact on the target group, which in turn will affect other groups as well. These key markets need to be understood, which is why extensive research on their perceptions towards the destination, including their motivation, desired experiences and the kind of destination that satisfies them, is necessary. Since all destinations offer landscape, culture, and history, it is important to know what differentiates the destinations from the perspective of visitors and non-visitors. This way, the destination's greatest strengths and weaknesses can be revealed. (Morrison 2019, 374-375; UNWTO 2007, 47-48; UNWTO & ETC 2009, 35-36.)

Similarly, the perceptions of stakeholders must be studied. This includes tourism stakeholders, stakeholders from other industries, the government, and residents. The perceptions of outbound tour operators, for instance, provide insights into what tourists are looking for in the destination, what sells best and what problems there are in selling. It is important to include stakeholders in branding process from the beginning, as they should be proud of the brand, to align their behavior toward guests with its values and to represent them in their own marketing communications. They must believe in and live the brand as brand champions to avoid giving visitors different messages about the destination. Therefore, stakeholders must agree with the brand essence. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 37-41.) Moreover, the DMO or NTO must maintain a good relationship with governmental bodies and include them in the brand building process as well, since the government is the greatest financial support for the development of the brand (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 98). The goal is to inspire political, economic, and societal leaders of society to act as brand ambassadors and bring the brand values to the wider population. (UNWTO 2007, 51.) But residents must also be involved, because their behavior in encounters with tourists influences visitors' experiences in the destination. Their behavior must match the brand values. Thus, they should be identified together with them, and be presented in presentations, discussion groups and the media. Their active participation in the process is crucial because visitors and residents should ultimately perceive the destination and its brand in the same way. Both should agree on the key assets and values, as only this ensures that expectation and experience match. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 101.)

The situation analysis, together with the tourism sector stakeholder and resident consultations, will ultimately reveal the destination's unique selling propositions, its "DNA". These are *the destination's non-imitable assets* that make it unique and differentiate it from the

competition, which is why they are the most important input for branding a destination. (Morrison 2019, 392-393.)

Based on these assets, the destination brand can be developed, which starts with the creation of a branding strategy. It includes the brand positioning that describes the aimed perception of potential visitors about the destination, must match the destination's market segmentation strategy and fit to the different target groups. At this point, the concrete goals for destination branding should also be defined, including the expectations that the brand should meet by a certain date. Finally, the situation analysis, branding objectives, positioning and marketing segmentation strategy must be recorded in a document which is the basis for the creative development. The document describes the general idea of the brand and how it should feel and look. (Morrison 2019, 392-395.)

This is followed by the development of the brand identity, including the creation of a logo, color scheme and visual image guidelines, as well as slogan and musical score. In this stage, the wording and typography must be considered, as well as the look of the brand to make it attractive and memorable. All these aspects are part of the brand promise. They will lead to expectations as they are perceived by the customers through the DMO's marketing communications. (Morrison 2019, 395-397.)

After the development of the brand strategy and identity, the brand can be launched and introduced through a public relations event. This event is designed to showcase the customers and stakeholders research, as well as the overall brand story. Next to the event, a campaign can further introduce stakeholders to the new brand by explaining the rationale behind it and how to use it. This can be accompanied by seminars and workshops to facilitate their use of the brand in their own marketing activities. (Morrison 2019, 397-399.) Additionally, a brand toolkit must be provided, which documents the destination's brand values, and explains the role of the brand and how to apply its values in marketing activities. Next to all the details about the brand, it should also contain the brand manual that explains its development, a photo gallery that support the brand's image, as well as a technical guideline that defines the use of the brand logo and the color tone. (Morrison 2019, 397-399.) As a result, the destination's brand is clear and easy to understand, since there will be no mixed messages, but one single approach. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 86.)

As a next step, the brand must be integrated in every communication with (potential) tourists. It must be omnipresent in the destination and deliver the expectations of the brand promise. Therefore, every encounter between visitors and tourism staff or residents, as well as stakeholders' marketing must be in line with the brand. Additionally, the brand must be

incorporated into all the DMO's marketing and promotion activities, online and offline. (Morrison 2019, 399.)

It is crucial to maintain the brand once it is established. The DMO must stick to its essence to create consistency and to enhance the destination's strengths. (Morgan et al. 2003, 292-296.) It must be observed regularly through customer feedback, research through brand-tracking surveys, and market intelligence to determine brand awareness, destination image, the intention to visit (Morrison 2019, 400), and if customer taste has changed. If the brand has no impact anymore on potential visitors, this indicates that the brand became too familiar and must be refreshed. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 103-107.)

In summary, the success criteria of destination branding are to understand the main target group, their motivation and perception of the destination; to know the competitive position and its strengths and weaknesses; to support the brand from the top, including the government; to involve stakeholders and ensure the use of the brand in their own marketing activities; and to monitor the brand and guarantee its impact. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 143-144.)

2.3   Stakeholders

2.3.1   Stakeholders in the tourism industry

Visitors' experiences in the destination depend on numerous actors (UNWTO 2007, 6). This group is large and highly diverse, which is why DMOs manage stakeholder relationships and coordinate their activities (Pike 2008, 289; UNWTO 2007, 6).

R. Edward Freeman (according to Morrison 2019, 264) defines a stakeholder as *any group or individual that can affect, or is affected by the achievement of a corporation's purpose*. Similarly, Pike (2008, 288) states that *a stakeholder is anyone who can impact on or be impacted by the organization*. In tourism, these *are groups and individuals who have direct or indirect interest in the management of a destination for tourism* (Morrison 2019, 24).

Several authors classify tourism stakeholders into different groups. Gunn (1997, according to Hankinson 2006, 249) identified three segments: tourists, corporate segments, and organic influences. Tourists are divided into leisure and business travelers, corporate segments include tourism and non-tourism organizations, and organic influencers are people and organizations who impact the destination's brand image, e.g. the media, education, and arts.

Morrison (2019, 25) formed five groups:

Figure 4. Stakeholders in destination management (adapted from Morrison 2019, 25)

While the first two are directly related to destination management, the other three groups are only indirectly linked to tourism. Direct stakeholders of tourism are represented in seven main tourism sector organizations:

Figure 5. Stakeholders in destination management (adapted from Morrison 2019, 25)

These include eight tourism sector stakeholder groups:

Figure 6. Tourism sector stakeholders (Morrison 2019, 266)

Stakeholders can work in the public or private sector. According to the UNWTO (2007, 6), they contain the national and regional government, economic development agencies, local authorities, town center management organizations, National Park authorities, transport providers, attractions, events and cultural organizations, accommodation providers, restaurant, leisure and retail operators, intermediaries as tour operators and conference organizers, destination representation agencies, the media, local tourism consortia and partnerships, business support agencies, and skills development organizations. Stakeholders in tourism are diverse and include non-profit organizations and NGOs as well as individuals (Morrison 2019, 4).

They perform primary and foundation activities that influence the visitor experience. Primary activities allow the visitor to experience tourism products and services, and include product development, promotion, distribution and sale, destination operations, and aftercare. Foundation activities deliver value to the experience indirectly but are fundamental for the tourism destination and its success. This involves technology, training of workforce, destination planning and infrastructure. Public or private agencies both perform primary or foundation activities, depending on whether the organization is based in tourism or in another industry. (UNWTO 2007, 20-23.)

Due to this diversity of tourism actors and their influence, it is essential for DMOs to engage with all of them. Continuous communication, consultation, involvement, and participation are mandatory to successfully develop and implement strategic decisions. This implies asking for opinions, working together, and engaging stakeholders to create solutions and strategies. (Morrison 2019, 25.)
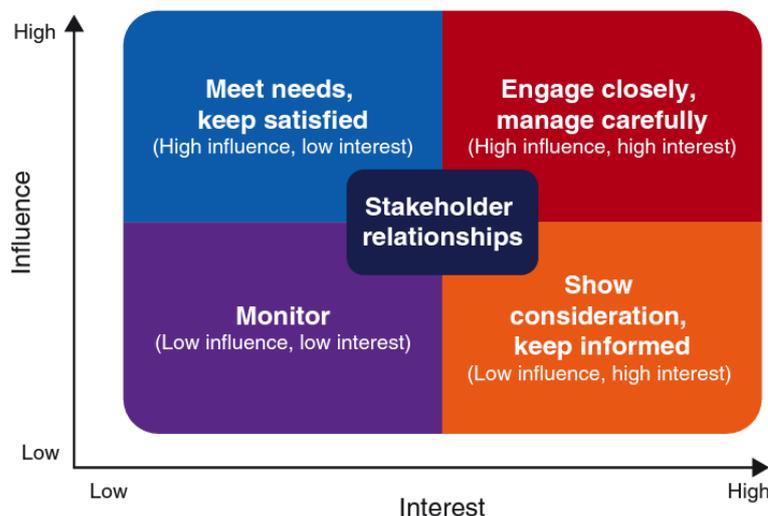

Figure 7. The Mendelow Power-Interest Matrix (Morrison 2019, 264)

The different stakeholders have varying importance in destination management (Figure 7). While some have a high influence and interest, the parameters are rather low for others. Therefore, the organization must analyze and prioritize its stakeholders within the destination to identify a strategy for relationship management and the interaction with the different stakeholder groups (Morrison 2019, 264). A study of 91 executives working in convention and visitor bureaus revealed that the most important stakeholders in tourism are hotels and hotel associations because they attract the high-yield MICE (Meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) sector to the destination and are an important source of revenue. These are followed by city/local governments, regional/country governments, attractions/attraction associations and state/provincial tourism departments. According to the study, DMOs judge the importance of stakeholders whether *they supply or facilitate funding, provide the tourism superstructure and product, participate in or generally support their programs, or influence governance.* DMOs are largely funded by hotel room tax or operating subdivides, which further explains the important position of hotels. (Sheehan and Ritchie 2005, 728-729.) Ultimately, the significance of stakeholders depends on several factors and varies between destinations. Regardless of the different levels of importance, however, the DMOs surveyed indicated that all stakeholders have the potential for cooperation (Sheehan and Ritchie 2005, 724).

Relationships with stakeholders also depend on the strategy and measurements DMOs apply. According to the study from Sheehan and Ritchie (2005, 725), successful strategies are involvement, communication, and partnerships/cooperative arrangements, while poor communications, only considering the interests of one or a few stakeholders and changing the strategy in their behalf, as well as excluding some from decision making were doomed to fail. Therefore, DMOs must *properly identify, analyze, prioritize, and manage relationships with multiple players* which leads to increased potential benefits, new areas of collaboration and a reduction in their potential threat.

2.3.2 Stakeholder engagement

To successfully manage a destination, the DMO must build and maintain good relationships with the different stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is mandatory for any public or private organisation or business to operate responsible, as there is constant interaction with stakeholders. It includes listening to them, discussing issues, and implementing their opinions and feedback about the organization and its operation, even though the wants and needs of different stakeholders and their priority for the organization may vary widely. Nevertheless, stakeholders must be able to participate in decisions that concern them. This will

lead to benefits for the organization: *from protecting the organisation's licence to operate to gathering information on improved market or product development. Done well, it can even lead to the development of new products and services*. (Jeffery 2009, 15). Furthermore, it creates *enhanced reputation, strengthened capabilities, improved relations with regulators, better ability to mitigate risk, and potential access to new consumers, new product ranges and new business models* (Jeffery 2009, 27). On the opposite side, mistrust and tension can occur when stakeholders are not engaged in the organization's operation. Consequently, stakeholder engagement is critical to business performance and competitive advantage, as organizations will be fully aware of their stakeholders, their interests and powers. (Jeffery 2009, 3-15.)

Figure 8. Stakeholder relationship and involvement activities (Morrison 2019, 268)

Successful stakeholder engagement is a two-way process that requires communication between organizations and stakeholders, as well as the exchange of information, opinions, and suggestions. This will inspire both sides to change and improve their work. (Jeffery 2009, 9.) Morrison adapted the concept of stakeholder engagement to DMOs and the tourism industry (Figure 8). One of the DMO's main roles is to provide leadership, which results in everyone working together in an organized way to reach goals. This coordination is important for marketing and branding, as well as for festivals and events. However, to achieve

it, the DMO must be accepted as leader by all parties affected. The first step in this direction is to listen to the stakeholders, understand their problems and concerns, and appreciate their suggestions. At the same time, the DMO should share their latest activities and achievements to show that it implements stakeholders' input. It should also seek stakeholders' opinions on the current situation of the tourism sector and its future challenges. This way, the DMO can identify current trends in local tourism that could lead to an early warning of emerging problems. Another important activity for involving stakeholders is to achieve teamwork. This requires communication, which is why the DMO must interact with its stakeholders on a regular base on suitable channels, such as websites, social media, or (e-) newsletters. Communication can be ensured by creating advisory boards, councils or committees which consist of tourism stakeholders and provide the DMO with input on marketing, product development, etc. Similarly, the DMO should inform stakeholders about programmes and activities and provide them with relevant information and data of the local tourism to support stakeholders' decision-making. In addition, the DMO is responsible for representing the tourism industry and its stakeholders to the government when serious problems arise in the destination. It must ensure that governmental leaders are aware of the industry's problems and find solutions to overcome them. In the reverse case, the DMO and stakeholders should celebrate successes in local tourism together, for example, with tourism awards programmes that recognize best practices and encourage stakeholders to improve operations. Lastly, the DMO must evaluate the relationship with its stakeholders to ensure that they are satisfied with their own business performances, the DMO and its activities, the current state of the local tourism, and the destination in general. This also clarifies which tourism issues and future trends stakeholders perceive and how they evaluate the destination's strengths and weaknesses. (Morrison 2018, 267-274.)

2.3.3 Significance of stakeholders in destination branding

Involving all stakeholders who seek and interact with visitors in destination management is a rewarding challenge. *Stakeholders can either assist the coordination to increase success or cause fragmentation to decrease success* (Bornhorst et al. 2010 according to García et al. 2012, 651). If stakeholders do not agree with the brand and have different values, they will not incorporate them into their own marketing activities. They will not embrace the values of the destination brand and consequently represent their own in contact with visitors, who will then receive different messages about the destination, preventing synergy (UN-WTO & ETC 2009, 37-39.; Hankinson 2007 according to García et al. 2012, 657). In contrast, synergy can occur when local stakeholders send consistent brand messages because

they understand the destination's identity and animate the brand beyond advertising. (Pike 2008, 266.)

To achieve stakeholder commitment, key stakeholders from tourism and other industries must be involved as active participants in the brand development process from the start. UNWTO & ETC recommend building a core team of key stakeholders to participate in the brand development. These stakeholders should be informed about the purpose and values of the brand and asked about their perception of the destination in high-quality in-depth interviews. The results need to be evaluated and should help shape the brand so that it realistically represents the destination, but still attracts tourists in the best way. Once the main part of the brand is developed, the DMO should provide clear guidance to key stake-holders on how to reflect the key brand massages in their own marketing communications. Later in the process, the DMO should educate a broader group of stakeholders about the brand and ensure their support in the concept. (UNWTO & ETC 2009, 37-39; 57-58.)

Stakeholders are indispensable to create important aspects such as loyalty, perceived quality, and word-of-mouth. Loyalty can be rewarded, for example, through discounts for tourist facilities or gift cards for hotels, but this can only be implemented in collaboration with the stakeholders who manage these facilities. Moreover, they contribute greatly to visitors' perceived quality of the overall experience, and thus to the prestige of the destination brand. The brand should be promoted in all tourism facilities to associate the brand with the quality of the different experiences. Both aspects lead to positive word-of-mouth, since customers recommend the tourism products to friends and family after their positive experiences, which in turn strengthens the destination brand. (García et al. 2012, 658.) Therefore, successful cooperation with stakeholders is essential for establishing a strong brand and implementing concrete measures.

Pike (2008, 112-113) and Morrison (2019, 18-20) agree that all tourism actors, including residents, must be involved in the tourism planning process. According to Morrison, stakeholders will feel appreciated and value more a strategic plan that they themselves were involved in creating. Furthermore, integrating stakeholders in the development is also accompanied by greater networking, which strengthens cooperation within the local tourism sector. Regarding the integration of residents, Pike suggests informing them about tourism developments, asking for their feedback, and involving them in solving tourism-related issues. Morrison additionally explains that regular surveys ensure that residents perceive tourism as primarily positive, which increases their support for tourism development. Communities need to understand the contribution tourism brings to the local economy, which increases their commitment to the sector. Regular exchange with locals is therefore

essential. The success of a destination depends on the efforts of all stakeholders, and goals can only be achieved through cooperation among them. Joining forces with potential partners can result in more budget, shared information, greater expertise, increased market appeal, and shared facilities. Thus, it is important to promote cooperation between authorities and the private sector.

However, according to the study of Blain et al. (2005, 334-335), stakeholders are not successfully integrated into destination branding. Only DMO chairs and marketing managers were mainly involved in the development of the destination brands and had the most influence. DMO members, such as local tourism companies, were the least involved, which is quite controversial considering that the destination brand's role is to represent their products and services. Instead, all actors that shape the destination experience should be considered and involved in the branding process – even visitors, as they are the main target to be attracted by the brand. Nevertheless, Blain et al.'s study revealed that many DMOs do not consider the participation of local tourism businesses or visitors. This also applied to DMOs that hired an external consultant, who could have been expected to include key stakeholders in the process. Consequently, Blain et al. conclude that DMOs need to involve local stakeholders and visitors more in branding activities to achieve effective destination branding.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Data collection

3.1.1 General information about the interviews

The interviews took place on the 14th and 19th July 2021, and lasted between 20 to 35 minutes, depending on how extensively interviewees answered and how many additional questions arose spontaneously. The author gave the interviewees the choice of a telephone or video call, resulting in two interviews via MS Teams and one via phone. Two of the three interviewees asked to receive the interview questions in advance, whereupon the author sent them the intended questions. However, slight deviations from the planned questions or their order occurred during the interviews, for example, when they had already been answered or addressed earlier. Additionally, new questions arose spontaneously during the interviews, or more detailed answers were requested. All interviewees agreed to the conversation being recorded with an audio recorder.

3.1.2 Interviewees

Initially, it was planned to interview internal as well as external stakeholders of the branding process (Table 1). The internal stakeholders in this context were the six people involved in the branding process from the beginning. These six internal stakeholders were guided through the branding process by a consulting firm, with the same consultant leading all seminars. The external stakeholders were supposed to be professionals from the tourism industry. The intent of interviewing these two different stakeholder groups was to compare their experiences of stakeholder engagement in the branding process. However, the interviews with the internal stakeholders quickly revealed that no external stakeholders had been engaged up to this point, rendering their interviews moot.

Internal stakeholders		External stakeholders
1. Economic Development Manager and Director of the Office for Business, Marketing and Tourism		Hotels
2. Director of the Marketing and Tourism Department		Restaurants

3. Deputy Director of the Marketing and Tourism Department	Museums
4. Director of the Office for Urban Development and Urban Planning	Organizers of the x Wedding
5. Director of the Office for Building Supervision and Lower Monument Protection Authority	Caretaker of Trausnitz Castle
6. Brand designer	
Consultancy firm	

Table 1. x's internal and external stakeholders in the branding process

Therefore, only three internal stakeholders were interviewed: the deputy of x's marketing and tourism department, the consultant who accompanied the branding process, and the brand designer who contributed initial ideas for the brand's design. They were chosen as interview partners because they work in different professions but participated in the branding seminars. This allowed in-depth exploration of the research questions' themes: The interview with the representative of x's marketing and tourism department focused on the general situation and the relationships with stakeholders, the interview with the consultant gave information about branding and its process, and the interview with the brand designer provided ideas for concrete measures on how to involve external stakeholders in the process. Since the author already knew them personally from the branding seminars and they wanted to support the scientific research on x, they all agreed to participate in the interviews.

3.1.3 Interview questions

The interview questions were phrased in German language, since all participants are native German speakers. They were prepared in advance in a semi-structured style. Generally, the interviews consisted of the same eight basic questions, with additional topics added to the interview depending on the participant's role (Appendix 1). For example, the consultant and brand designer were requested to describe their jobs, situate branding therein, and explain their role in x's branding process. In contrast, the interview with the deputy of the marketing and tourism department focused on the DMO's interactions with stakeholders to find out which ones are particularly important and are worked with closely, how interactions are conducted, and whether strategy for stakeholder management exists. Afterwards, all

three interviews continued with their individual definitions of a brand/branding to determine differences in the understanding. They were then asked to identify the main participants in the development of the brand, as well as the role of stakeholders and their influence on the process. To explore potential risks of stakeholder engagement, the next question addressed whether stakeholders could negatively impact the brand development and what this would look like. This question aimed to find out reasons why stakeholders might not be involved and whether this could be justified. However, this was followed by the counter question of how stakeholders can contribute to the success of the brand and how they can be integrated in the long term. Furthermore, the consultant was asked how far x was in the branding process and by when it should be completed. Similar to this question, the deputy head of the marketing and tourism was queried on how the brand will be presented and introduced to the public. Finally, the interviews with the consultant and deputy elicited their expectations of the stakeholders regarding the brand. In general, the interviews contributed to answering the research questions and provided deeper insights into the practical implementation of brand development.

3.2   Methods of analysis

The author transcribed the interviews immediately after they were conducted, which resulted in 12 A4 word pages. Since the interview questions were developed to answer the research question "**How can stakeholders be successfully integrated into the branding process of a destination?**", the sub-questions comprised the three key themes according to which the data had to be organized:

1.   Who are the stakeholders of the tourism destination x?
     → **Identification of stakeholders**

2.   Why are stakeholders integrated in the destination branding process?
     → **Reasons for stakeholder engagement**

3.   What activities exist to integrate the external stakeholders into the branding process?
     → **Implementation of stakeholder engagement**

Consequently, the author first analysed the data in the broad context before turning to details. Each response to the different questions was carefully reviewed and assigned to one or more categories in which it fit. The data in each category were then reanalysed by assigning a code, or subcategory, to each piece information (Table 2) After the analysis, the data were translated from German into English. Generally, the three key themes and their subcategories served to understand the collected data and organize it in a way that allowed to answer the research questions logically.

Identification of stake-holders	Reasons for stakeholder engagement	Implementation of stake-holder engagement
x's tourism stakeholders	Reasons for stakeholder engagement	x's approach to brand de-velopment
Key stakeholders	Reasons against early in-volvement	Status of stakeholder in-volvement in the process
Main stakeholders in the branding process	Identification of the ideal time for inclusion	Next steps for stakeholder engagement
	Expectations of stakehold-ers regarding the brand	General interaction with stakeholders
	Potential negative influence on the process	Stakeholder management strategy
		Ideas for involving stake-holders in the branding pro-cess

Table 2. Data analysis

4 Research results

4.1 Definition of the term brand

Branding plays a major role for all three respondents. While x's marketing and tourism department has only recently begun to address the topic, the consultant's and brand designer's entire professional lives revolve around branding. The consultancy company, on the one hand, is specialized in strategy development and change management and sees a unique brand as an important element of the overall strategy. The brand designer, on the other hand, gives it a face and soul. She wants it to be experienceable with all senses so that everyone recognizes it, whether they encounter the brand online or in-store. Branding, she believes, allows the brand to come to life and to make the brand message and its values tangible. This ultimately leads to a certain image consumers have of a business, which is why she defines a brand as the feelings that consumers have about a company. The consultant agrees that the brand image is shaped by how consumers perceive the brand, which in turn depends on the extent to which the company delivers on its brand promise. Similarly, the goal of the deputy of x's marketing and tourism department is to create a positive image among potential visitors. For her, branding is an opportunity to increase awareness and recognition of x by developing an attractive and credible brand that is unique.

4.2 Identification of stakeholders

According to the consultant, all employees must deliver on the brand promise at the brand's contact points. The stakeholders are therefore the ones who make the brand experience tangible.

In the seminars of the brand development process, the following stakeholders of the tourism destination x were identified by the participants:

- Tourists: day tourists, multi-day tourists, international tourists, campers, cyclists, business travellers

- Accommodation establishments: hotels, Airbnb's/private accommodations, pitches for camper vans

- Gastronomy: Bavarian, Italian, international, outdoor gastronomy

- Culture (POI): City residence, Trausnitz Castle, museums, historic city center, x Wedding, guided city tours

- Retail trade

- Tourist Info/Guides

- Population: inner city residents

- Infrastructure: Deutsche Bahn, public utilities, car park operators, taxis

These are important stakeholders that must be considered in the branding process. x's department for marketing and tourism works closely together with the key players. These are primarily the accommodation providers and gastronomy, as they ensure that the customer enjoys his stay, followed by the retail trade, as guests mostly visit to do shopping on weekends, and the city guides who present x. Additionally, cultural attractions play an important role, especially its castle, as well as the city residence and museums.

The core team of the brand development process is manageable. It consists of a total of five representatives from the three most important sectors of tourism, economy and living space, as well as a brand designer. x's Office for Business, Marketing and Tourism represents the **visitors** and their demands and expectations, the representatives of x as a living space regarding urban development, cityscape and residential areas represent **citizens**, and the Office of Economy represents the interests of the **business community**. The goal is to make the city attractive for these three stakeholder groups (tourists, citizens, and businesses), because they should all identify with the city. In addition to the representatives of the three areas, their superiors and other important experts and decision-makers, i.e. the mayor and city councilors, are engaged. However, the decision-makers did not follow the invitation to participate in the seminars but were presented with the results afterwards. Thus, the core brand development team consists of six people, the "internal" stakeholders, who play a major role in the process. Other, "external", stakeholders were not involved, although the interviewees indicated that there would be many reasons to do so.

4.3 Reasons for stakeholder engagement

Particularly, the consultant provides strong reasons for involving stakeholders in the brand building process. He points out that how the brand is perceived by consumers depends on the extent to which the brand promise is delivered by stakeholders at the touchpoints. Stakeholders share responsibility for bringing the brand to life and making its uniqueness and values tangible to customers, which is why all employees, residents, etc. must express the brand's values at all touchpoints with the brand. According to the consultant, it is impossible not to involve the stakeholders as they are the touchpoints that bring the brand to life, which is why they are an integral part of the brand. Therefore, it must be communicated that there is not a brand and the stakeholders separately, but that the stakeholders are the brand. They contribute most to the brand because they shape the tourists' brand experience. Every

aspect of a destination must be consistent with the brand's values, whether it is the architecture, the streetscape, or the behaviour of the people. To ensure this coherence, the strengths of a destination are elaborated in the brand development process to create an authentic brand rather than following trends. Otherwise, the destination and its stakeholders would lose their identity. Such a brand would meet resistance and stakeholders would only be convinced with great effort, which is why such branding processes are doomed to failure. Instead, politicians such as the city council and important stakeholders must be well involved. Their support is necessary to go public with the brand and create synergies, because x is too small a city to be successful without joint forces. Therefore, the success of the brand is significantly influenced by the stakeholders. It depends on how they perceive the brand, which is why they are the decisive group in the brand development and why intensive communication and interaction with them must take place regularly.

In practice, however, it is difficult to involve stakeholders in the branding process from the beginning for various reasons. The deputy of x's marketing and tourism department explains that the city of x has a large number of stakeholders, which is why it is challenging to reconcile them all. These were narrowed down for the branding process to make it more efficient and timesaving. The different offices represented the stakeholder groups to avoid exceeding the scope and involving too many people in details. According to the deputy, these offices know how to represent interests at large, while individual stakeholders tend to focus only on their own perspective. A discussion on such a scale was not possible for reasons of efficiency and time, as it would have required a large survey, which is extremely complex, according to the consultant. The brand designer supports this view by adding that the more people are involved in the process, the more difficult it is to develop and design the brand. Hence, the most important decisions should be made with a core team, as any external stakeholder would have had a different opinion. According to her, it is almost impossible to satisfy all stakeholders, and numerous city councillors must already be convinced of the brand to approve it, which is why it is necessary to focus on their consensus.

Similarly, the deputy of x's marketing and tourism department points out that internal political difficulties exist in x, that are common in small cities, but make it difficult to involve stakeholders immediately. Some stakeholders have great power and can influence the city council to reject projects. However, the brand identity and values should not depend on these influential stakeholders, which is why the representation of stakeholder groups by the different offices is also reasonable from the political perspective. Nevertheless, to prevent them from feeling excluded and spreading negative sentiment internally, they are included towards the end of the process but left to believe that they still have an impact on the idea.

These political difficulties require a well-thought-out strategy on when to involve stakeholders to create an authentic brand.

According to the brand designer, stakeholders should only be involved in the branding process once the brand message has been developed. She argues that it often takes time to get used to and like something new. For this reason, stakeholders should not be involved too early if they are not experts in the field. The deputy supports this by saying that it is not important for the stakeholders to create the "origin" of the brand, but rather to accompany and contribute to it later in the process. The brand designer adds that the brand message developed now would likely have remained largely the same even if stakeholders had been involved from the beginning, because, according to the consultant, they often do not know exactly what they ultimately want. However, once the design is created, the brand should be presented to the stakeholders in an appealing way to motivate them to integrate it into their own marketing activities. In this way, the brand becomes tangible and gains recognition.

To achieve this, x's marketing and tourism department expects stakeholders to be committed to and identify with the brand. They have their own marketing activities and do their own press work, so ideally, they should support the brand to create synergies. A good cooperation between the individual stakeholders must be developed to jointly represent x with the new brand and to increase awareness.

But just as stakeholders contribute to the success of a brand, they can also negatively influence the branding process. According to the consultant, this is the case when stakeholders do not share the brand promise and do not want to represent the brand's values. The deputy of x's marketing and tourism department adds that important stakeholders might not want to be represented in the marketing activities with the new brand. If they reject the concept, they can hinder the process and turn the city councillors against it. This may result in less funding going into the city marketing projects to communicate the new brand. Stakeholders could show strong resistance and prevent open and cooperative collaboration, which is why they now need to be convinced of the brand.

4.4   Implementation of stakeholder engagement

As previously discussed, only the internal stakeholders - the core team - have been involved into the branding process and developed the brand for the most part. Nevertheless, all interviewees confirm that external stakeholders have also played an important role so far, even if they were not directly involved. x's brand was created in a process that began with an internal approach considering the destination's stakeholders and unique assets, which

resulted in a brand positioning. It was built on x's strengths, e.g. Middle Ages, to which the stakeholders contribute significantly with their operations. To take them into account, their interests were expressed by representatives of tourism, economy, and citizens. The results of the branding seminars were documented in a positioning statement, which will serve as guideline and orientation framework for all stakeholders active in the city. Subsequently, it was discussed how the brand promise can be expressed in the design and at the various touchpoints, which in turn affects the stakeholders. However, the concrete measures for the touchpoints still need to be worked out and implemented with them.

The consultant emphasises that the branding process is currently in transition to engage the external stakeholders. This step involves re-examining the initial ideas, which is why the brand will still be refined with the stakeholders, even if it has been developed with them in mind. The deputy of the marketing and tourism department confirms that it will be presented to the stakeholders and then slightly adjusted depending on the importance of the stakeholder who requests a change. Accordingly, they can still contribute to the concept if certain aspects have not yet been considered.

However, before the brand can be presented to tourism businesses, it must first be approved by the city council to ensure that it adequately represents the city. Numerous meetings have to be held to convince the parliamentary groups of the concept. Furthermore, the brand must be presented to the mayor and the city director, who have to approve the brand. Following this, the core team will approach influential stakeholders and association leaders, as many stakeholders are organised in associations, such as the retail sector. In this way, the leaders of each stakeholder group are engaged on behalf of the individual stakeholders. They need to be convinced that an authentic brand has been developed. After that, the brand can be launched, which for x means that all brochures, stationery and merchandise will carry the new brand.

Once the brand has been introduced to the stakeholders, constant communication is essential to ensure that they are involved in the development of the brand from that point on. The deputy states that until now, the marketing and tourism department has so far been in contact mainly with the major cultural, accommodation and gastronomy businesses for the preparation of trade fairs, inquiries about package deals, group tours or organisational matters such as new brochures. Nevertheless, the exchange with the accommodation providers has still been rather infrequent. To change this, regular host meetings are now planned once or twice a year, to which the accommodation providers are invited and where future projects and opportunities for participation are discussed. In comparison, the exchange with the retail and gastronomy sectors is more regular and takes place two to three times a year.

The focus is on the projects to be implemented in the next six months and on possibilities to attract people to the city. In addition, there are regular meetings of the tour guides, which are held once a month to address problems, suggestions for changes, possible projects and what is important for the city and the guests. These meetings are accompanied by the staff member of the marketing and tourism department responsible for city tours and keep the guides constantly informed about new developments. Moreover, the exchange with experience providers, culture and sightseeing venues discusses how leisure offers can be marketed better.

These meetings must now also include branding. Therefore, a strategy needs to be created on how stakeholders can contribute to the promotion of the brand. However, according to the representative of the marketing and tourism department, there is no general strategy for stakeholder management yet, but only an approach. It defines who the stakeholders are, what their importance is and what their expectations are. The branding seminars supported this first approach by revealing x's current positioning as a destination. Based on these results, a strategy with concrete measures on how to better integrate stakeholders into the city's tourism operations will be developed soon.

Nevertheless, the interviewees have several ideas on how to integrate stakeholders into the branding process. According to the brand designer, one possibility during the development of the brand could have been to involve stakeholders via social media. For example, they could have voted on the different logos in polls. Similarly, the consultant suggests that stakeholders can be integrated by actively contributing to certain issues of the brand. This should become their daily work so that the brand is integrated into their regular activities. In this way, the brand will be constantly developed and improved.

The representative sees the opportunity of stakeholder integration in constant communication. In the future all further developments of the brand must be discussed together with the stakeholders. She sees an opportunity in the fact that the city is currently in the process of organizing all associations as the Economic Forum with an administrative office at the Office of Economics, Marketing and Tourism, which will facilitate stakeholder involvement. She explains that communication is important in the long run, which is why stakeholders are now involved in all innovations and ideas via newsletters. The aim is to stay in touch and assure stakeholders that they are integrated in all projects, which guarantees long-term cooperation.

The brand designer also supports cooperation as a measure to engage stakeholders in branding. As the brand is based on the areas of innovation, tradition and dolce vita, these need to be highlighted, which automatically involves stakeholders. For the area of

innovation, for example, a website or a brochure could be created that presents the economic area of x, its various companies and further education opportunities. Moreover, companies can be integrated into the city or company run and jointly design merchandise with x's new brand and their own, which creates synergies. For the area of tradition, the brand designer suggests an event in the form of a backyard tour, in which companies and the owners of remarkable buildings can easily be involved. For the integration of young people, she sees great branding potential in the incubator for start-ups, founders, and creatives. Additionally, joint events can be developed with the university. In this way, students and the business community will be introduced to the brand. The tourism industry, in turn, will be familiarized with the new brand and its appearance at tourism fairs. Consequently, she believes that the integration of stakeholders in the city's branding will ultimately be based on collaborations.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Evaluation of the results

<u>Who are the stakeholders of the tourism destination x?</u>

Various stakeholders were identified for the tourism destination x: tourists, accommodation establishments, gastronomy, culture (POI), retail trade, tourist info/guides, population, and infrastructure. They vary in relevance, and the marketing and tourism department currently works together with only the most important ones (accommodation and gastronomy, retail trade, and city guides). The author was surprised by the significance of retail trade, while some stakeholder groups identified in the theory were not specifically mentioned, such as convention and meeting venues, events, media, and government. However, the study confirmed the high importance of accommodation establishments, which was already mentioned in the theory, as they are a significant source of income for tourism. This also explains the importance of gastronomy and retail trade in x, as tourists visit the city on weekends for shopping and dining.

<u>Why are stakeholders integrated in the destination branding process?</u>

The scientific theory revealed several reasons why stakeholders should be involved in brand development. The brand must be omnipresent to enhance its impact. This applies to the behaviour of destination stakeholders, as tourists encounter the brand in interactions with locals and tourism businesses. Therefore, stakeholders are expected to live the brand as brand ambassadors and represent its values to communicate a consistent message about the destination to visitors. Stakeholders contribute greatly to the quality of the visitor experience and thus to the reputation of the destination brand, which is why they need to be satisfied with it. The brand will represent them, while at the same time they are expected to incorporate it into their own marketing activities and tourism facilities to increase synergies and brand recognition. Accordingly, the different perceptions of stakeholders about the destination must be integrated into the brand development to create an authentic brand. Additionally, stakeholders will be more likely to appreciate a concept that they have been involved in developing, which in turn will encourage collaboration and networking within the local tourism sector. This is essential for establishing a strong brand, but also for the overall success of a destination. Consequently, all local stakeholders need to be involved in the branding process as early as possible to ensure their commitment to the brand.

Respondents to this study confirmed most of these reasons. It became clear that visitors' perception of the brand depends on the stakeholders and the extent to which they deliver the brand promise at the touchpoints. Every aspect of a destination must be consistent with the brand's value, and stakeholders are responsible for representing those values at the contact points. Together, they bring the brand to life and make it tangible for customers. Therefore, tourists' brand experience depends on the stakeholders, and consequently, the overall success of the brand. In addition, stakeholder perceptions support the development of an authentic brand, while local politicians and key players must be convinced of the brand to go public, as joint forces are essential for the success of small cities.

However, the study also revealed that the immediate involvement of stakeholders in the brand development process is challenging due to efficiency, time and political reasons. Respondents indicated that each stakeholder would have had a different point of view and that it is impossible to consider all of them in the development process. Numerous city councillors must already be convinced of the brand to approve it, which is why it is necessary to focus on their consensus. In addition, some stakeholders have great power and could influence the city council if they disagree with the concept, which would hinder the process. For this reason, interviewees indicated that stakeholders should not be involved too early, but only after the brand message has been developed. They assume that it is not important for stakeholders to create the origin of the brand, but to contribute to it at a later stage. Therefore, the number of stakeholders was narrowed down at the beginning of the branding process.

As a result, the brand was developed by a core team of six people. Different offices represented the stakeholder groups tourists, citizens and businesses and their interests to not exceed the scope. Nevertheless, this implies that only internal and no external stakeholders were involved in the brand development.

<u>What activities exist to integrate the external stakeholders into the branding process?</u>

Derived from the general measures for involving stakeholders in destination management, they must be similarly involved in the brand development process. This requires continuous communication, consultation, and participation of stakeholders, which requires listening to them and incorporating their opinions on the brand. Their feedback must be taken into account, as stakeholders should be able to participate in decisions and strategies that affect them. For this reason, they must be involved in the concept and informed about its progress through suitable channels such as websites, social media, or newsletters. As mentioned above, x's tourism stakeholders have not been involved in the branding process.

Nevertheless, they are integrated in the general operations of the marketing and tourism department through newsletters and meetings. In particular, the meetings with city guides, as well as retail and gastronomy take place regularly to discuss problems or suggestions for improvement, or resp. upcoming projects, while meetings with accommodation providers are still rather irregular, which will change in the near future.

x's brand was developed from a core team of internal stakeholders. This approach was supported in theory by UNWTO & ETC (2009, 37-39), which recommend forming a core team of key stakeholders that participate in the brand development to share their perception of the destination. In the case of x, these were six people from different sectors that represented the interests of visitors, citizens, and businesses. This subdivision is reasonable as the city must be attractive to these groups. However, now that the main part of the brand is developed, key stakeholders need clear guidance on how to reflect the core massages of the brand in their own marketing communications, while a broader group of stakeholders needs to be educated about the brand.

In comparison, Morrison (2019, 390) states that consultation with tourism stakeholder and residents should already take place before the brand development. Similarly, Blain et al.'s study (2005, 334-335) criticizes that mainly DMO chairs and marketing managers are involved in the development of destination brands, while local tourism companies are the least engaged. Morrison and Blain et al. conclude that all actors who shape the destination experience should participate in its branding at an early stage. This did not happen in x's branding, as stakeholders are only involved after the brand has been developed but are led to believe that they still have an influence over the idea.

Nevertheless, all interviewees in this study confirmed that external stakeholders played an important role, even if they were not directly involved. x's brand was created through a process that began with a detailed identification of the destination's stakeholders, as the overall goal of the brand is to satisfy them. They contribute to the city's strengths, while they are expected to integrate the new brand in their own marketing activities and behave accordingly at the touchpoints. The concrete measures for the individual touchpoints must now be defined together with the stakeholders. Consequently, the branding process is currently in the transition phase of engaging external stakeholders. This involves a review of the initial ideas, which is why the brand is to be refined together with externals. However, it was also found that the adjustment of the brand depends on the importance of the tourism stakeholder who wants the change. In contrast, other key players such as the mayor, the city director and the city council have a great influence on the brand, as its implementation

and launch must be approved by them. Afterwards, the brand is launched, which for x means that all brochures, stationery, and merchandising items carry the new brand.

Overall, the interviewees suggested several ideas for involving stakeholders in the branding process to actively contribute to certain issues of the brand. They recognized the importance of ongoing communication to advance the brand and proposed newsletters and meetings to do so. Similarly, social media can be used to engage stakeholders through voting or surveys. In addition, cooperation must take place through websites, brochures, joint design of merchandise, events, and tourism fairs. However, these ideas now need to be further developed and turned into reality.

5.2   Recommendations

How can stakeholders be successfully integrated into the branding process of a destination?

The study identified several recommendations for successfully engaging stakeholders into the branding process of a destination. The process should begin with a detailed analysis and prioritization of stakeholders, including their influences and interests. x needs an elaborate stakeholder management strategy to ensure collaboration and the appropriate engagement method for each stakeholder. This can vary between involvement, communication, and/or partnerships/cooperation arrangements. These methods were also recognized by the interviewees. Nevertheless, some stakeholder groups identified in theory were not considered by x's marketing and tourism department, such as convention and meeting venues, events, media and government, which could be due to the lack of a stakeholder management strategy. However, they are essential to the overall success of the branding process and launching the brand. For x's branding process, it would have been advisable for governmental bodies and decision-makers to have accepted the invitation to participate in the branding process to experience and understand the development of the brand. While this non-participation of city councils is not attributable to the core team, they are responsible for not integrating other stakeholders.

Stakeholders must be involved in the branding process at an early stage. Although it is reasonable for a core team to lead the process, stakeholders still need to be informed about the brand development. The perceptions of tourism stakeholders, residents, and visitors, which can be obtained through surveys, interviews, or seminars, should not be ignored. The case destination has shown that this is challenging to implement, as small cities face various obstacles, e.g. efficiency, political, time and financial constraints. Therefore, it is understandable that x initially had its stakeholders represented by different offices. Nevertheless, stakeholders must be actively involved after the rough development of the brand. They

should be able to contribute their own complementary ideas, regardless of their significance for the city, to avoid mistrust and tensions in (future) cooperation. x's brand has been developed in a rather "top-down" approach, with city councils and key stakeholders having great influence on the final traits of the brand, while small or medium-sized stakeholders have hardly any input. Yet they are the ones who represent the brand at the touch point, which is why measures must be developed that define how stakeholders can contribute to brand issues on a daily basis and how the brand's further development can be integrated into their everyday operations. This requires regular meetings, which was recognized by the marketing and tourism department and why such meetings will now be more frequent. Additionally, the interviewees noted the importance of constant communication, for example through newsletters, and cooperation that is essential to involve them.

The theory also claimed that the brand launch is crucial to introduce the brand to a broader group of stakeholders, while the study found that in x this is mainly seen as printing the design on brochures, stationery, and merchandise. Nevertheless, a proper brand launch through an event, campaigns, and workshops for stakeholders is necessary to achieve awareness and understanding of the new brand, as stakeholders were not involved in its development. Overall, interviewees stated good ideas on how to engage stakeholders into the branding process, but more concrete measures must be developed now, as they did not exist at the time the study was conducted.

6 Summary

The thesis examined how stakeholders can be successfully involved in the branding process of a destination. In this regard, the city of x was chosen as a case destination because it was developing a brand at the time the study was conducted and the author was allowed to accompany this process. To solve the research problem and answer the research questions, the thesis combines a theoretical framework and empirical study.

The theoretical framework was divided into the three topics of destination management, branding, and stakeholders, with definitions and more detailed explanations of each sub-topic to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding. Thus, the role of destination management organizations, the challenges and advantages of destination management, the branding of tourism destinations, the destination branding process, stakeholder engagement, and the significance of stakeholders to destination branding were explained. Furthermore, the case destination x was presented, as well as its responsible office for tourism, the role of tourism in the city and x's new brand. This secondary data was obtained from academic publications such as books, journals, and previous studies from credible sources. Additionally, information from renowned tourism organisations as well as local articles and statistics were used.

Afterwards, the thesis addressed the study, which focused on who the tourism stakeholders in x are, why they should be integrated into the branding process, and what measures exist to engage them. Primary data was obtained through the author's participation in the branding seminars and through qualitative research based on three semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Analysis and interpretation of the results revealed that x's brand was developed by a core team of six persons, the internal stakeholders. External stakeholders, such as professionals of the tourism industry, had no influence on the development of the brand and are only approached after the brand concept is approved by the mayor, the city director, and the city council.

The author concluded that a stakeholder management strategy is the first step for successful stakeholder integration in the branding process. On the one hand, this thoroughly identifies and prioritizes the stakeholders and, on the other, defines suitable measures for cooperation. Brand development should not be based on a "top-down" approach that only considers decision-makers and key players, but it should also include the perceptions of other stakeholders. Since this did not happen in the branding of x, a proper brand launch must now take place that comprehensively introduces the brand to the stakeholders.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions

Basic questions:

- What do you understand by a brand/branding?

- Who are the key players in x's brand development process?

- Which stakeholders are involved in the process?

- Do other stakeholders also play a role in the development of the new brand?

- Do stakeholders have an influence on the development of the brand?

- To what extent have stakeholders been considered in the development of the brand?

- To what extent do stakeholders contribute to the brand's success?

- How can stakeholders be integrated into brand management in the long term?

Other questions:

- Please describe briefly what you do for work.

- Does branding play a role in your job?

- What is your role in the brand development of x?

- Among tourism stakeholders, are there any that are more important than others?

- Which stakeholders do you work most closely with?

- Do you communicate with stakeholders on a regular basis?

- How does the collaboration with stakeholders take place?

- How regularly does this exchange take place?

- Do you have a stakeholder management strategy?

- How will communication with external stakeholders be accomplished in relation to branding?

- What are possible measures to engage external stakeholders with the brand?

- Why are other stakeholders not involved?

- Why were external stakeholders not integrated into the process from the beginning?

- At which stage is the city of x in the development of the brand?

- When will the brand be launched?

- How will the brand be introduced?

- Can stakeholders negatively influence the brand development process?

- What expectations do you have of the stakeholders?