



HÖGSKOLAN
DALARNA

Master Thesis

Baking Dalarna's Biking Cake

**Collaboration as a means for destination competitiveness
A case study of "Biking Dalarna"**

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Abstract

In the contemporary tourism industry, the competitive game is between destinations. Tourism operations struggle to remain competitive on the international market and their success depends to a large extent on other complementary and competing tourism organizations at the destination. It is the sum of the total tourism offerings at the destination which determines its attractiveness. This research explores tourism collaboration process as a means of generating destination competitiveness. The focus of the research is on the enhancing factors which contribute to the success of the collaboration and to the development of quality tourism products. The research studies the case of Biking Dalarna, a collaboration of different organizations at five biking destinations in Dalarna, Sweden. Its purpose is to develop biking tourism in the region and to make Dalarna into Sweden's leading biking destination. It is a qualitative research; the empirical data was collected through in depth interviews with representatives of six Biking Dalarna member organizations. The qualitative data collected from the participants provides inside look into the members reflections and experience of collaborating. The findings of this research demonstrate how collaboration has improved the biking product in Dalarna and promoted solutions to development problems. The research finds the good relationship between the collaborating actors and the involvement and leadership of the regional tourism management organization as the most contributing factors to the success of Biking Dalarna. The research also suggests that a third desired outcome of collaboration, improved marketing attributes was yet to be achieved in the case of Biking Dalarna.

Keywords: Collaboration, Cluster, Destination competitiveness, Mountain biking tourism, Dalarna,

Table of contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Conceptual Framework	4
2.1 Making sense of: Cluster, Collaboration and Coopetition	4
2.2 Enhancing Factors	9
2.3 Mountain biking tourism, doing it right	13
3. Methodology	14
3.1 Limitations	16
4. Biking Dalarna the Study Case	17
4.1 Background	17
4.2 The Destinations.....	20
5. Findings	23
6. Discussion	29
7. Conclusion	33
References	35

List of Tables & Figures

<i>Table 1. Networks vs Clusters</i>	5
<i>Figure 1. collaborative destination marketing</i>	6
<i>Table 2. Desired outcomes and advantages of collaboration to the individual member</i>	8
<i>Figure 2. Simplified Tourism Collaboration Model</i>	12
<i>Table 3. Participants by position, organization and destination</i>	15
<i>Figure 3. Map of Dalarna, the destinations of “Biking Dalarna”</i>	20
<i>Table 4. Biking Dalarna destinations in Sälen</i>	21

1. Introduction

International tourism has developed considerably from the times when sun, sea and sand resorts were the only destinations on the travelers' map. Today, it is a diverse and competitive industry offering a wide variety of niche products to suit every trend and taste. As noted by Lazzertti and Petrillo (2006), in the contemporary tourism industry, the competitive game is between destinations. Competitive advantage is generated through the development of quality tourism products (Ritchie and Crouch, 1999) and the key is partnerships and close co-operation (Buhalis, 2000). Wang notes that "tourism as a social and economic system is ideally suited to the development of partnership, given the range and diversity of organizational and community interests and involvement." (2011:281). Tourism destinations are amalgam of competing and completing companies and organizations often constructed of small and medium size enterprises (SME) which typically lack the resources and skills to market, manage and operate their businesses in a professional way (Buhalis, 2000) a must in order to compete internationally. Wang(2011) adds that cooperation is the most efficient way for a destination to utilize its limited resources, together SMEs could pull the necessary resources for marketing, product development, value creation and to highlight the availability of certain activities at the destination (Novelli and Spencer, 2006). As the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) has stated in their 2001 competitiveness report it

"Strongly advocates partnerships between the private and public sectors as the most effective means of achieving competitive travel and tourism development". (WTTC through Dwyer and Kim, 2003:394)

In Sweden, the regional cooperation council of Dalarna has identified tourism and hospitality as core industry of the region's future. It recognized the need to improve the region's competitiveness as a tourist destination internationally. Accordingly a strategic plan, named Dalarna 2020 was designed in order to set the objectives. The plan aims to make the region to the leading and most exciting tourist destination in northern Europe. Its goals are to add three million new guest nights in the whole region, to reach a five percent annual growing rate. Dalarna, located in the middle of the long country, is already the third largest tourist destination in Sweden. It is the home of some of Sweden's most popular ski resorts and winter sport arenas. It is also known for its rich history, unique culture and authentic tradition. The region is blessed with many beautiful lakes to enjoy in the summertime. According to the strategic plan, tourism in Dalarna is to be developed according to four attracting themes: Summer Outdoor activity, Winter Outdoor activity, Alpine Ski and Tradition and Culture. Together these four themes are to make Dalarna into a competitive year round tourist destination (Invest in Dalarna agency, 2012).

In the spirit of Dalarna 2020, Biking Dalarna was launched in June 2012 with the goal of becoming Sweden's bicycle Mecca (Invest in Dalarna agency, 2012). The project was initiated and promoted by Destination Dalarna, the regional destination management organization. It is a collaboration between five different destinations in the region (four of them are already well established skiing destinations). Together the destinations of Biking

Dalarna offer world class bicycle experiences for all levels and tastes stretching over more than 650 kilometer of marked cycle roads, touring paths, downhill slopes and cross-country routes.

Cycle tourism is one of the biggest growth sectors in tourism. According to a study published by the European parliament committee on transport and tourism from 2012 cycle tourism is worth €44 billion per annum to Europe (Lumsdon et al: 13). Cycle tourism has the potential to provide economic, social and environmental benefits to a destination (Ritchie et al, 2010). Mountain biking in particular has emerged as a popular activity offered by ski resorts worldwide. Once cleared of snow, the slopes could transform into great biking trails. Mountain Biking offers the ski resorts an opportunity for summer revenue. It has the potential to solve the seasonality related problems. To increase utilization of facilities (accommodation, restaurants, lifts and shops for example), ski resorts could offer their valued staff longer employment periods. The potential of mountain biking to complete skiing is so great that in the U.S.A, the National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) has partnered with the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) for the purpose of increasing visitation and improving mountain bike experiences during the summer season at ski areas (Blevins, 2011).

The trend of inter-organizational cooperation within the tourism industry has gained much popularity as different actors collaborate in order to market and promote tourism products at a destination. The value of collaboration and its increasing popularity makes it particularly relevant for tourism research (Wang, 2011:281). The aim of this research is therefore to explore tourism collaboration process as a means of generating destination competitiveness. The focus of the research is on the enhancing factors which contribute to the success of the collaboration and to the development of quality tourism products. The research will investigate the case of Biking Dalarna and analyze which factors have contributed to the collaboration and how the collaboration could promote Dalarna to become a more competitive biking tourism destination.

This research is done within the interest of Destination Dalarna and with their cooperation. Biking Dalarna is a young and promising tourism collaboration project which is highly valuable to the regional tourism management organization. It has the potential to increase Dalarna's competitiveness as a destination and to generate a summer tourist season and overcome seasonality problems at ski resorts. Another importance of Biking Dalarna is due to the fact that the collaboration is first of its type and through researching it valuable lessons could be learnt to apply on similar tourism collaborations in the region. With that in mind, the author of this paper hopes that by researching the case of Biking Dalarna in the context of the collaboration process it will succeed and come up with valuable findings which will help to improve the tourism product.

Through qualitative methods, the case of Biking Dalarna as collaborated product development will be researched. The data will be collected through a series of in-depth interviews with key actors in Biking Dalarna and the regional tourism industry. This data will be supported with secondary data extracted from related web resources and media coverage.

The collected data will be analyzed according to the conceptual framework. This paper focuses on the supply side of Biking Dalarna. The importance of how tourists perceive the collaboration and value the product is not disregarded, however due to limitations of time and lack of synchronization with the biking season and the conduction of this research, a comprehensive research of the demand aspect could not have been conducted.

Following this introduction, a conceptual framework will be built upon the relevant academic theories. It will attempt to portray the connection between three major concepts: cluster, collaboration and coepetition and to break down the factors which affect the collaboration process. Then a methodology chapter will elaborate and defend the selected data collection methods. The case of Biking Dalarna will be presented including the history of its forming and the member companies; it will also present 7Stanes a Scottish biking collaboration which is the model for Biking Dalarna. The description of the case will be followed by presentations of the empirical findings. The paper will end with a discussion and conclusion chapter.

2. Conceptual Framework

With help of the existing body of knowledge about tourism clustering, collaborations and coopetition, the following pages will construct the conceptual framework of the collaboration process at a tourism destination. First there will be an attempt to pin down three central inter-organizational collaboration concepts. Then the desired outcomes and private firms' motivations to collaborate will be discussed followed by the pre-conditions and barriers to collaborate. Enhancing factors and the important role of the DMO (Destination management organization) will be analyzed in order to present a complete picture of the tourism inter-organizational collaboration process. A simplified model of tourism collaboration will be presented to illustrate and summarize the conceptual framework. Finally, a short section about cycling tourism development will provide a theoretical background for the case study. The section will present findings from relevant academic research and will discuss factors which improve mountain biking destinations.

2.1 Making sense of: Cluster, Collaboration and Coopetition

Cluster: the formation

A review of the academic literature reveals a variety of definitions and concepts referring to different types of collaborations in a tourism destination. The concept of tourism cluster receives relatively much attention (Nordin 2003, Jackson and Murphy 2006, Braun 2005, Kim and Wicks 2010 for example) The cluster perspective focuses on the interaction between firms with relation to the environment there they interact (Svensson et al, 2006) . Porter's competitive and cluster theory model (1998) is perceived as a strategic model of successful tourism development especially relevant for small enterprises in the early stages of economic development. According to Porter (1998), clusters are:

“geographic concentrations of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries, and associated institutions (universities, standards agencies, and trade associations) in particular fields that compete but also cooperate” (197–198).

Jackson and Murphy (2006) note that Porter's definition could be used to describe a tourist destination, where different companies are collaborating in order to “put their location on the map” (1022). Michael (2003) categorizes clusters into (i) horizontal- different companies which sell the same product or service in a given geographical area and are competitors but their co-location attracts the potential costumers to the region. (ii) vertical-co location of suppliers from different stages of the value chain which leads to specialization and (iii) diagonal clustering- different companies which produce or deliver different products which together are consumed by the tourist as one experience (hotels, restaurants and attractions for example) Michael emphasizes the critical role of this type of tourism clustering in the decision making process of the tourist. Braun (2005) adds that a cluster can gain an identity as a recognized tourism brand thus attracting relevant business and creates economic externalities (scale and scope).

In an attempt to distinguish clusters from other forms of business relationships, Nordin (2003) emphasizes the geographical aspect of clusters claiming it a major difference between clusters and networks. However the elusive nature of this geographical aspect challenges the definition of clusters. A second notable difference suggested by Nordin is that unlike networks, clusters do not pose membership requirements. Table 1 below presents further difference between networks and clusters.

Table 1. Networks vs Clusters (based on Rosenfeld 2001, adapted from Nordin 2003)

<i>Networks</i>	<i>Clusters</i>
Membership is restricted	Membership is opened
Access to specialized services at lower cost	Attracts specialized services
Based on agreements	Based on trust
Makes complex production possible	Generate demand for firms with capabilities
Based on cooperation	Cooptetion
Common business goals	Collective visions
Horizontal	Value chain -Vertical

It is important to note that the differences presented in the table, characterizing clusters as vertical and trust based only are not in line with other definitions of clusters. The lack of consistency in the definition of clusters derives from the fact that in practice clusters vary significantly in type, structure in dynamics which makes cluster a difficult concept to pin down (Martin and Sunley, 2001). Despite the differences defining the borders of the concept cluster, from the literature the essence of the cluster concept is portrayed as:

“Cooperation and coordination among individual, firms and sectors for their mutual advantage” (Svensson et al, 2006:88)

And as Kim and Wicks state

“When all actors cooperate with each other, the tourism cluster is more likely to succeed in achieving tourism competitiveness in a global market and in turn contributes to regional and national prosperity” (2010:7)

For the purpose of this paper the concept cluster is understood as the formation or alternatively the environment where the different organizations (horizontal, vertical or diagonal) within the same industry get together. This view of the cluster concepts suggests that clusters may include more constructed forms of networks within the cluster.

Collaboration: the process

The notion of cooperation among different companies and potential competitors appears in the collaboration theory developed by Wood and Gray (1991). The model describes the concept of collaboration as including three dimensions of collaboration: (i) Preconditions: the factors that make collaboration possible, including the motivations that cause organizations to participate; (ii) Process: the way stakeholders inter-act to accomplish their objectives; and (iii) Outcomes: the results of the collaborative efforts. Collaboration is defined as

“a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide to act on issues related to that domain” (Wood & Gray, 1991: 146 cited in Urwin and Haynes, 1998)

To Wood and Gray’s model, Urwin and Haynes (1998) add a fourth dimension of evaluation as a reflective action and critical analysis. Wang and Fesenmaier have included the notion of evaluation in their development of the collaboration model (2007). They have divided the process dimension (from Wood and Gray, 1991) into five stages: Assembling (issue identification and partner selection), Ordering (establish goals and develop program), Implementation (assign roles and execute program), Evaluation (asses goals and expectations) and Transformation (evolve, change, stay the same or end). This is presented in figure 1 bellow.

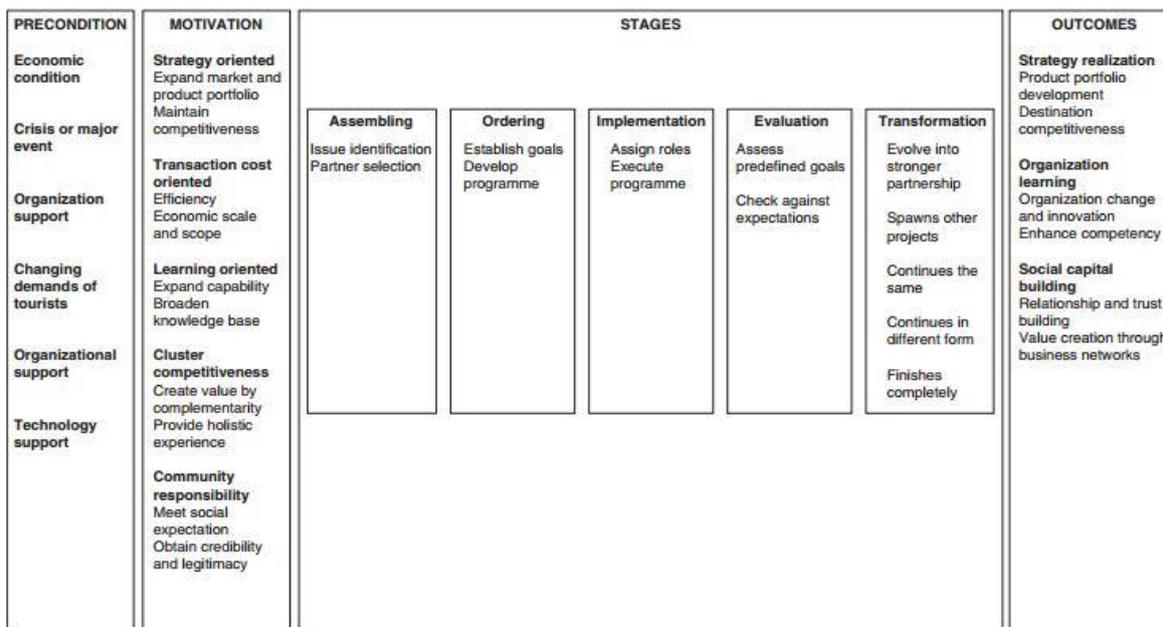


Figure 1. collaborative destination marketing Source: Wang,2011 Adapted from Wang and Fesenmaier, 2007

Similarly to the common use of Porter’s cluster theory in tourism research, also the collaboration theory has been widely used in the context of tourism destination development and has been the basis for the development of theories and models on community tourism planning (Jamal and Getz, 1995), Local tourism policy making (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999), evolutionary model of partnerships in destinations (Selin and Chavez, 1995) and collaborative destination marketing model (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, the important knowledge derived from reviewing these theories is the understanding that collaboration in the context of tourism destination is a dynamic and cyclical process which brings together different local tourism actors for the purpose of solving a problem, reaching new markets and / or promoting development.

Coopetition: The relationship

Collaboration can take form in different types of relationships which differ by the formality of the relationships and levels of integration. Wang (2011) for example draws a continuum

ranging from loosely tied affiliations to strategic networks. Wang describes strategic networks as formal structures which integrate a shared vision and take a system orientation in destination marketing to achieve the common goals through consistent strategy and concentrated efforts. According to Wang, the position of the different relationships along the continuum is affected by the balance between competing and cooperating approaches among the participating organizations. This notion leads to the third relevant concept used to explain business relationships, coopetition.

Coopetition, defined as simultaneous cooperation and competition (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996 cited in Pesämaa and Eriksson, 2010). It describes a situation where different companies which offer the same product or service are involved in competition for value appropriation on one hand while on the other are involved in cooperation for the purpose of value generation (Wang, 2011). In relation to the tourism industry, Pesämaa and Eriksson (2010) explain coopetition as cooperation between tourism organizations at a destination when baking the cake (attracting the tourists to the destination) and a competition when dividing the cake (market share once the tourists are already at the destination). Michael (2003) states that the notion of coopetition provides a rationale for clustering, the different enterprises which construct the cluster cooperate locally in order to compete globally.

And so from the three presented concepts it is possible to construct that coopetition is the complex relationship among the different cluster members which together take part in the collaboration process for the ultimate purpose of achieving competitiveness. These definitions of the concepts are not exclusive. As the literature review has presented, these concepts appear in a variety of uses which reflects the different research approaches and more than that it reflects how things take place in practice.

Desired outcomes: What's in it for me?

It was established in the previous sections that successful collaborations and clusters are believed to achieve competitiveness on the global tourism market. In other words, it is making the destination as a whole more attractive to potential tourist than other tourist destinations offering similar experiences. The tourism destination is characterized by a fragmented structure typically based on small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). By collaborating, these individual cluster members can pull together their limited resources to develop a quality tourism product and to reach greater exposure through cooperative marketing (Jackson and Murphy 2006, Novellie et al 2006, Nordin 2003). Combining knowledge and resources, the cluster members can achieve much more than the sum of each individual's potential (Bramwell and Lane, 2000). Table 2 below lists the desired outcomes and advantages of collaborations and tourism clusters as extracted from the literature review. These desired outcomes and perceived advantages serve as the motivations for the individual enterprise to take part of the collaboration process.

Table 2 Desired outcomes and advantages of collaboration to the individual member by Author

Desired outcomes and advantages	Author
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence the planning domain • Reduced uncertainty in a private firm's environment 	Jamal and Getz, 1995
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economies of scale • Visibility and image • Develop of niche product • Share of knowledge • Development and innovation • Generates healthy competition raises product and management quality 	Nordin, 2003
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows value creation 	Braun, 2005
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce consensus and synergy • Leading to new opportunities • Innovative solutions to common problems • A greater level of effectiveness 	Bramwell and Lane, 2000
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving • Learning from partners • Distributed risks • Collective understanding • Generating social capital • Shifts in the power distribution • Organizational survival 	Butterfield et al ,2004
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand market and product portfolio • Economies of scale • Expand capability ,broaden knowledge base • Meet social expectation ,Obtain credibility and legitimacy • Create value through complementary services 	Wang, 2011

Pre-conditions

“Organizations do not form alliances in a vacuum and their collaborative behaviors are influenced and shaped by environmental forces, which set the preconditions for organizations to enter into collaborative relationships” (Wang, 2011:262-263).

According to Wang, these pre-conditions include: (i) Economic conditions- such as economic downturns which increases the importance of cost sharing. (ii) Crisis- when an unplanned major event comes up, collaborations is viewed to be the only effective means to respond. (iii) Changing patterns of demand- emerging trends and increasing seasonality trigger collaborations, especially among SMEs. Jamal and Getz (1995) proposed that recognition of interdependence, the perceptions that significant benefit will result from the collaboration,

and recognition of importance of the issue are all necessary pre conditions for organizations to collaborate. They also emphasize the importance of a legitimate and skilled convener to initiate and facilitate the collaboration process. A later section discussing the role of the DMO will elaborate more on the last point.

Barriers and disadvantages

So far the literature review has portrayed collaboration and clustering as an ideal strategy well recommended to all destinations; however as Sölvell and Williams (2013) state, more often than not clusters fail to fulfill the potential promised by theories. For a start, tension is likely to be present between companies in similar point of the value chain (Palmer, 2002), these direct competitors might have difficulties to accept the request to share resources (Jamal and Getz, 1995). Companies might be reluctant from participating in collaboration from fear of free loading (ibid) and free riding (Nordin, 2003). Meaning, when participants in the cluster (free loading) or in the destination (free riding) enjoy the benefits of the collaboration without sharing the costs. Jamal and Getz (1995) add that organizations might be reluctant to collaborate in fear of losing control over planning and decision making. By joining a collaboration brand, companies might undermine their own brand name, further than that companies risk their brand reputation will not be distinct when associating it with other organizations (Tschirhart et al, 2005).

Collaborations and clusters are prone to fail when established merely for the purpose of raising funds (ibid). Braun (2005) states that many regions lack the critical mass of firms and infrastructure needed for cluster development. On top of that, many of the SMEs operating at a tourist destination do not consider themselves as a part of a larger industry and do not have the time or resources to invest in collaborating. Other failure reasons include the lack of a strong local leadership (Jackson and Murphy, 2006), disagreements over objectives and different management styles (Palmer, 2002) and inability to overcome power differences (Bramwell and Lane, 2000) or inability to negotiate satisfactory relationships and building of trust (Tschirhart et al, 2005).

2.2 Enhancing Factors

With respect to the complexity of cooperation, to a large extent the success of the collaboration process and the strength of the cluster depend on the relationship between the different member organizations. Reviewing the literature, trust is emerging as the key concept for successful relationship. Trust is said to be conducive for information and knowledge flow (Braun, 2005). Trust is a condition for companies to decide to collaborate and to continue to collaborating and is influenced by member's reputation and existence of reciprocity (Tschirhart et al, 2005). Palmer (2002) adds that trust motivates commitment and adds that this is a cyclical process of which commitment and trust enhance each other. The balance between cooperation and competition determines to a large extent the long term competitiveness and success of the destination (Palmer and Bejou, 1995). Competition, motivates the cluster firms to pursue quality and ambitious goals (Sölvell and Williams, 2013). Wang (2011) distance from the target market influences the balance between

competition and cooperation, meaning that the closer the market is from the destination the more reluctant the companies are to cooperate. Other influencing factors are the maturity of the destination's marketing approach. At early stages, companies are suspicious and perceive other companies as threats a notion which changes as other destinations are identified as the competition.

The presence of good partnership and trust does not promise that the collaboration process will achieve its goal (Svensson et al, 2006). The potential of the cluster to develop new products and increase competitiveness is determined by two circumstances: centrality and cohesion. The former refers to the cluster's contacts with external clusters and its ability to transform information from the outside. Cohesion refers to the levels of connectivity within the cluster, the more cohesive the cluster (as in a form of formal alliance) the more efficient the cluster will be in transforming knowledge, between different cluster members, into product development (Guia et al, 2006). In other words, interaction, between the different firms in the cluster, promotes the conditions to innovation. A strong interaction depends on shared vision, similar norms, dense networks and common language (Sölvell and Williams, 2013). Development of new products and the ability to involve a critical mass of firms from all levels of the value chain will strengthen the cluster and promote its growth (Braun, 2005). Other identified contributing factors include bonding and socialization, interdependence, sharing of resources, group identification, proximity and a common vision and goals (different authors through Gorman, 2006).

Kim and Wicks (2010) designed a model for tourism cluster development based on Porter's diamond model (1998) and Dwyer and Kim's (2003) destination's competitiveness model. In their model, Kim and Wicks account for four factors which support the cluster and enhance the destination's competitiveness. These factors are: (1) The core resources and attractions factor (Dwyer and Kim, 2003): This includes natural resources such as lakes, mountains, beaches etc. cultural resources such as heritage, cuisine, handicrafts etc. and Created resources such as events, festivals, shopping etc. The core resources are the main pull factors for tourists to the destination and their existence is essential. (2) The destination management factor: The ability of the DMO to enhance the core attractions, to motivate all local firms (core and complementary) to improve their product quality. According to Kim and Wicks (2010) this factor mainly relates to the ability to market the destination.(3) The complementary conditions factor: This factor comprises two categories "tourism superstructure" which includes food, accommodation and transportation facilities and "supporting elements" which relates to general infrastructure, accessibility to a destination beyond physical facilities such as regulation and entry visas, and hospitality and market ties . (4) The demand conditions factor: This includes three elements of demand (i) awareness which is generated through marketing (ii) perception of the projected image and (iii) the compatibility of the perceived image and the tourist's preferences (Dwyer and Kim, 2003).

Role of the Convener

The importance of a legitimate and skilled convener to initiate and facilitate the collaboration process (Jamal and Getz, 1995) was mentioned earlier in this text. According to Gray (1989, through Jamal and Getz, 1995) the role of the convener is to identify and attract all relevant stakeholders to the collaboration, it is noted that the right convener could by its own presence motivate participation in the collaboration. In the context of tourism, this role is naturally filled by the destination's management organization (DMO). The DMO is often a part of the regional government and have political power and access to financial means. The DMO's principle functions are: applying long term strategies, represent regional interests on national level, maximize multiplier effects, and develop the regions image (Minguzzi, 2006). A DMO which is a part of the regional government could promote tourism policies which encourage and reinforce clustering (Braun, 2005). It could also channel public funding and distribute resources towards the tourism cluster (Kylanen et al, 2012 and Palmer, 2002). Palmer found that a strong public leadership improves the efficiencies of marketing associations and supports cooperation by providing administrative facilities (ibid). The DMO plays a pivotal role in the network like cluster formation (Braun, 2005), bonding and linkages are facilitated through the leadership (Jackson and Murphy, 2006). The DMO plays a central role coordinating for cooperation (Kylanen et al, 2012).

“The DMO can improve the management and development of tourism by ensuring coordination and cooperation between the different agencies, authorities and organizations concerned at all level” (Dwyer and Kim, 2003:388).

In their study of organized clusters in mid and northern Sweden, Sölvell and Williams (2013) has found that the formation of clusters under a common organization has been most successful in facilitating innovation and cooperation between firms. They note that cluster organizations serve three main purposes (i) to create a common identity which provides a sense of belonging and a stronger brand (ii) a channel of communication to R&D institutions and (iii) promote joint purchases and marketing activities. In tourism, this important role of organizing the clusters belongs to the DMO.

And arguably the most fundamental aspect of the DMO's role in local tourism cluster is the ability to view the whole value creation and collaboration process as a whole. The DMO needs to communicate to the private enterprises the importance of the long term strategies based on cooperation to develop a competitive destination and mutual benefit (Wang, 2011).

This section has discussed the factors which, according to different research, are vital for the success of the cluster / collaboration process. It is possible to divide these factors into three major groups. (i) Relationship factors (horizontal and vertical): levels of trust, reciprocity, balance between cooperation and competition, commitment, interdependency and cohesion. (ii) Resources: primary natural, cultural and created resources which the tourism products are based on, complementary products to the primary resources, Universities and general infrastructure. (iii) The convener / DMO and its ability to lead, coordinate, manage and

market the cluster. Arguably, the development of a competitive tourism product requires to a large extent all three factors.

Figure 2 below presents a simplified model for tourism collaboration. It illustrates the main concepts derived from the literature review. The enhancing factors groups are represented in the following way: First, the resources and attractions factor is the base for tourism product development (enhancing factor ii). Based on it, the tourism cluster includes companies and organizations which provide the tourism product (primary) and other companies and organizations along the value chain (complementary). These companies are connected through coepetition (horizontal) or value chain (vertical, diagonal), the quality of these relationships is the first (i) group of enhancing factors identified in the conceptual framework. The DMO should take a central role in the tourism cluster (iii enhancing factor, the convener). The “recycle” arrows vector illustrates the cyclical and dynamic nature of the collaboration and it stresses the approach that collaboration is a process. Next are the three main outcomes of the collaboration process, problem solving (change in demand, seasonality, cost saving and learning), marketing attributes (including larger market share, new markets, strong brand name and highlight availability) and product development (quality improvement and new products) which in turn ultimately contribute to the development of a more competitive tourism destination.

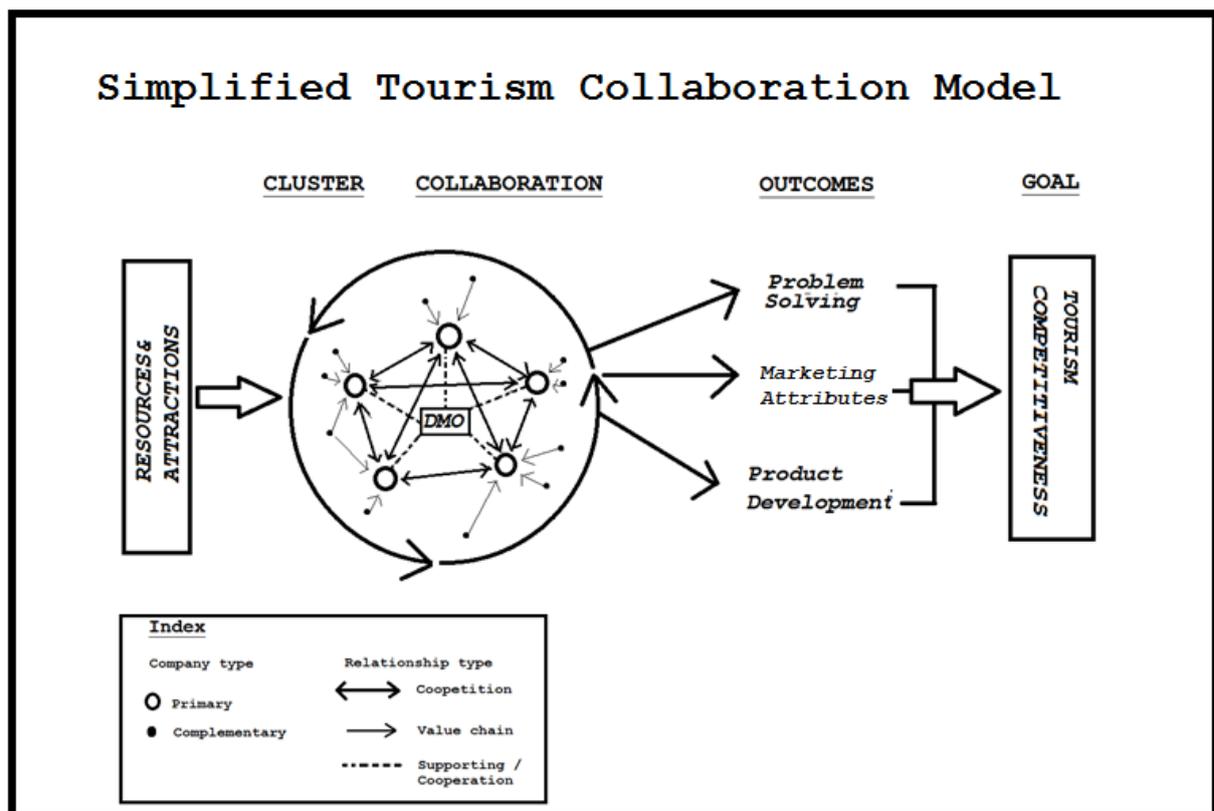


Figure 2. Simplified Tourism Collaboration Model. Source: Author

2.3 Mountain biking tourism, doing it right

Cycling and mountain biking has evolved to become a tourism product and a travel motivator recognized by both research and tourism development agencies worldwide. There are a growing number of biking related tour operators and mountain resorts offering lift-accessed bike parks and trails. More women join the trend and family oriented biking products become a part of the industry (Tourism BC, 2008).

Trails are the core component of the biking product. Moran et al (2006) have found that bikers assign great importance to the characters of the trail when choosing a destination. These include difficulty level, remoteness versus congestion and variety of landscapes. Trails have an increased appeal when they communicate the unique experience of the place and culture (Tourism BC, 2008). In a broader aspect, developing a mountain biking destination requires a holistic vision to address the total tourism experience. It involves the collaboration of various tourism organizations, biking related companies and the local community to provide the visitors with bike rentals and service, the availability of convenient transportation to the trailhead and a selection of food and accommodation options (ibid). To maximize mountain biking opportunities at ski resorts, key members of the IMBA (International Mountain Biking Association) has suggested to: Offer lift access, lessons and guided tours, rentals and retails, food and beverages and bike friendly lodging. They also recommend offering a diverse network of trails varying in style and difficulty. Use events to reach out to the community and to attract media coverage and to work in close cooperation with local mountain bike groups (IMBA world summit, 2012).

In their mountain biking tourism development guide (Tourism BC, 2008), the MBTA (Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association) emphasizes the advantages of regional clusters in the development of mountain biking tourism. According to the guide, collaboration between different communities located in the same region, can offer a wider variety of trails (types and difficulties), attractions and services to enhance the visitor experience and broaden the potential market. Forming in a cluster allows the different communities to pool funding and resources for development and promotion.

3. Methodology

The aim of this research is to explore the tourism collaboration process as a means of generating destination competitiveness. To conduct this research, qualitative research methods were applied. Qualitative research suits to explore and explain a phenomenon within a specific group, as Winchester (2005:4-5) stated, qualitative methods are used to “elucidating human environments and human experiences within a variety of conceptual frameworks”. The research examines the case of Biking Dalarna, and the research focuses on the factors which strengthen the potential of the collaboration to succeed (increase competitiveness). The research focuses on the supply side and the research questions investigate the relationship between the collaborating actors, their motivations to collaborate, perceived benefits and disadvantages from collaborating and reflections about the role of the convener. A data collection method that allows the researcher to encourage the participants to talk and involves them in the research procedure was believed to be most efficient in order to answer these questions, and therefore the empirical data collecting method chosen for this research was in depth face to face semi structured interviews, the data collected in these interviews is presented in the “Findings” section. In depth interviews are time consuming. It requires preparation for the interviews and post work transcribing the collected data. In this research in depth interviews were possible and suitable as the number of members in Biking Dalarna is relatively small (10 persons). The member organizations are significantly different in size and type, some belong to commercial international tourism chains and others are non-profit organizations representing a small community of less than 500 people. These differences made it non-sufficient to evaluate the participants’ answers by the same measurements. Therefore a purposed interview guide was used for each participant.

Prior to the data collection stage a thorough background research about all Biking Dalarna member organizations was conducted. The background research included a content review of all member organizations websites and review of media storied and press releases about Biking Dalarna. The fact that this research is conducted with the cooperation of “Destination Dalarna” allowed the researcher access to very precious background information provided by the manager of the regional tourism management organization and the initiator of Biking Dalarna in a serious of meetings. The information collected in the content review and meetings with the manager of the regional DMO were very helpful to construct a background for preparing the interviews, presenting the case of Biking Dalarna and contributed to the understanding of the data collected.

Six Biking Dalarna members were purposely selected to represent different organization types in the collaboration. Table 3 below lists the different participants in the research by position, organization and destination. Semi structured interview guides were prepared to allow the interviewees room to elaborate and contribute from their own experience and to reflect about collaboration. Although a purposed guide was prepared for each interview, all have been designed according to four themes: (1) Biking as a tourism product and its importance for the destination (2) motivations to join Biking Dalarna and desired outcomes

(3) the process of collaboration and the relationship with other members and (4) the role and contribution of the DMO. For each theme a number of primary questions were designed, these questions were used in order to focus the interview on a subject and let the participant the opportunity to bring up own reflections and raise important points. For each primary question a few secondary questions were prepared, those were asked when the participant did not provide the sought after information while answering the primary question. The interviews were conducted using a combination technique of funnel and pyramid. The interview started with simple to answer general descriptive questions to allow the participant to feel comfortable and confident. This was followed by questions focused on more specific subjects and the last part of the interview gave room for voluntary observations and personal reflections.

The research was conducted in the months April and May 2013; it is less than a year since the launch of Biking Dalarna and before the second season since the collaboration has started. Due to limitations of time and schedule constrains, one face to face interview was replaced by a questionnaire of ten open questions covering the interview themes. The duration of all five interviews was around one hour. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Three interviews were conducted in English and two in Swedish, this is not perceived to affect the quality of the data collected and the only implication of it is that no direct quotes from the interviews held in Swedish are brought in the paper.

The collected empirical data is presented in the “Findings” section. Using the main concepts which were constructed in the “Conceptual framework” section the data is analyzed in the “Discussion” section where in accordance to the “Simplified tourism collaboration model” the contributing factors and outcomes of the collaboration are discusses.

Table 3. Participants by position, organization and destination

Participant's Position	Organization	Organization type	Destination
Manager of downhill arena and Biking activities	Säfsen resort	Private owned commercial company	Säfsen
In charge of biking activities and manger of the rental shop	Skistar Lindvallen	Part of an International corporation	Sälen /Lindvallen
Responsible for the development of the “non-ski” season in Sälen	Malun-Sälen tourism office	Public / Tourism office	Sälen
Coordinator and marketing manager	Säljfällstorget	Association of local businesses	Sälen
In charge of biking activities	Rörbäcksnäs IS	Nonprofit local sport club	Sälen /Rörbäcksnäs
Marketing and Information manager	Lugnet Falun	Public / Sport and event complex	Falun

3.1 Limitations

The research is based on empirical data collected from six out of the ten members of Biking Dalarna. Arguably, the research would have been more complete if data was collected from all related actors, due to limitations of time and availability of the different related organizations, this was not possible within the scope of this research. The research examines collaboration as a means to gain competitiveness, through the study case it investigates if and in what way did Biking Dalarna make the region a more competitive destination. To answer that the research relies on the perceptions and opinions of the Biking Dalarna members, these are highly valuable and reliable but arguably the analysis would have been more complete if supported by hard figures and statistics which represent the changes in demand since the launch of the Biking Dalarna. Such data was not collected by the member organizations and therefore could not have been used in this research. A third limitation of this research is related to the improvement of the tourism product as a result of the collaboration. The importance of how tourists perceive the collaboration and value the product is not disregarded, however due to the lack of synchronization with the biking season and the conduction of this research, a comprehensive research of the demand aspect could not have been conducted.

4. Biking Dalarna the case study

4.1 Background

Outdoor summer is one of the four themes of Dalarna 2020, the regional tourism development strategy plan. The outdoor summer theme offers the tourists a variety of nature related activities (trekking, cycling, and fishing, camping for example) based on Dalarna's natural resources and attractions. The Outdoor theme is designed to attract active families and couples without children. It targets both the domestic and international markets with focus on the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Germany and England. The international market is perceived as essential for reaching the goals of Dalarna 2020 (Destination Dalarna, 2010). Destination Dalarna, the regional DMO, promotes the development of high quality tourism products. It provides local entrepreneurs with the tools and framework using two methods: "World class seminars" and the "Learning concept". Both methods were applied by Destination Dalarna in the creation of Biking Dalarna

(i) "World class seminars": When the manager of Destination Dalarna asked key figures in the region's tourism industry what they can imagine of doing together, their answer was to learn. This notion has led to the development of the strategy of identifying leaders in the international tourism industry and to learn from them. The representatives from the leading companies are invited to lead seminars in Dalarna for local organizations and entrepreneurs (Destination Dalarna).

(ii) "Learning Concept": Based on research from the University of Karlsruhe, the "Learning concept" (Lärandekoncept in Swedish) is a strategy which in the context of Destination Dalarna, aims to stimulate joint product development collaboration among local tourism organizations and businesses. The concept builds on the approach that the cooperation among the different actors is a key for the development of quality tourism products. It is a process which builds on four phases which are preceded by a preparation phase which involves informing and preparing the participants. (i) The first phase is "brain storming" This phase answers the question: "what needs to be done?" and includes raising relevant ideas. (ii) The second phase is of "validating" the selected ideas from the first phase to answer "what is possible to do?" it includes a simple market research and an analysis of the potential. (iii) The third phase is the selection of partners and identification of stakeholders, "who should take part?" and (iv) the last phase involves the commercializing of the developed idea and the design of a business model, "how to make it happen?"

It is worth to remark that to a large extent the "Learning concept" resembles the first two stages of the process dimension in the Wang and Fesenmaier collaboration model (2007) presented in the literature review. These are of Assembling (issue identification and partner selection) and Ordering (establish goals and develop program). In both cases the purpose of these phases is to create the best conditions for a collaboration to succeed in the development of new tourism products.

Dalarna is a well-established Alpin ski destination. The ski resorts in Sälen and Idre Fjäll are among Sweden's most visited tourist attractions. Winter sport destinations face strong seasonality patterns. Their economy depends on a short revenue generating period, staff turnover is high, hotel rooms stand empty and facilities are underutilized (Lewis and Bischoff, 2005). Seasonality creates a need for product development to overcome the challenges of seasonality and maximize the use of facilities and resources in Dalarna. The application of the "Learning concept" suggested the development and promotion of biking as a major tourism product. This follows global trends of mountain biking at ski resort during the summer months, as noted in the introduction. In September 2010, a group from Destination Dalarna went on a study trip to southern Scotland to visit the 7Stanes, which was identified as a benchmark for mountain biking destination with attributes similar to those of Dalarna.

The 7Stanes

The 7Stanes is an award winning mountain biking network in southern Scotland. The network is constructed by seven world class mountain biking destinations which together account for the U.K's largest area for mountain biking. In each of the destinations, a stone sculpture of a local myth is located which gives the network its name (stane is the scotish word for stone). Together, the seven mountain biking destinations offer over 400 kilometers marked and mapped trails of varied difficulty levels. There are eight mountain biking centers serving the destinations. In each center there is a car parking, cafes, toilet facilities and tourist information centers. The 7Stanes attract 400,000 tourists to the south of Scotland, generating over £9million net additional spend per annum to the local economy (7Stanes, 2012).

The 7Stanes were developed by the Forestry Commission in 2001 in an effort to increase tourism demand to the south of Scotland countryside which was hurt by the foot and mouth disease. The 7Stanes is a partnership organized under "The 7Stanes Mountain Biking Community Interest Company" (CIC). The CIC is a nonprofit organization; its board includes representatives from national and regional destination marketing organizations, the Forestry Commission and three local business groups. The three business groups represent more than 150 local businesses; these include companies offering mountain biking related services (guiding, rental, retail) and tourism business (accommodation, restaurants). The CIC promote and market the 7Stanes, it includes brand management and merchandise production, active social network activities, fund raising and creation of events. Its aim is to sustain the 7Stanes project by increasing visitor numbers and generating revenue to make the project self-funding, and benefit the economy of south of Scotland. The CIC acknowledges the importance of close work with the local stakeholders, partners and business and contributes its success to the cooperation between public and private organizations (Stumpy, 2013). The MBTA report on mountain biking tourism (2008) concludes that the success of the 7Stanes as a tourism product is due primarily to its regional approach. The creation of seven different mountain biking centers across the region motivates tourists to come to Southern Scotland and stay for a few days. The same effect could not have been created by only one center.

Forming Biking Dalarna

After the study trip to the 7Stanes, on February 2011 a representative from the 7Stanes came to Borlänge to lead a “World Class” seminar with 60 participants from local tourism organizations which were identified by the regional DMO as potential actors in the development of biking tourism in Dalarna. One of the core messages communicated through the seminar is the importance of collaboration between different biking locations across the region for the success of developing biking tourism. The seminar raised the interest of a number of organizations in Dalarna which went on a second study trip to the 7Stanes on May 2011. Both the trip and the world class seminar were mentioned by the participants as significant triggers to create a similar operation in Dalarna.

The study trip was followed by meetings for the purpose of direction setting. At the end of September 2011 representatives from Falun, Sälen, Säfsen, Idre and Destination Dalarna held a workshop for the development of mountain biking in Dalarna. The participants were divided in groups and each of the groups was given an assignment. The objectives were: naming the common operation, design of trail signs, trail policy formulation, information texts design. The goal was to create a standardized and communicative trail network. A Biking Dalarna destination must fulfill a set of standards, to ensure that for the cyclist, it should be easy to find the right way on the trail and easy to choose the right trail (difficulty level), and each destination should have all tourist and cyclist services available and easy to find information about other biking experiences in Dalarna. On the 15th of June 2012, Biking Dalarna the regional mountain biking cooperation was officially launched including the web based platform www.bikingdalarna.se which gathers all information about the different biking destinations and trails, riding and safety tips in English and Swedish. In November 2012 a fifth destination, Rättvik has joined Biking Dalarna raising the number of member organizations to ten. Together the five biking destinations offer more than 700 kilometers of marked biking experiences in four categories. Road, leisure cycling, downhill and cross country. Trail difficulty level is graded by a four colors scheme similar to the system used for downhill skiing: green (easiest), blue, red and black (most difficult). Since the launch of Biking Dalarna, a monthly meeting of Biking Dalarna members is being held (usually in the form of a telephone conference). In Sälen the different organizations meet on a monthly basis to discuss biking development, planning of events and common problems. Figure 3 below present the location of the five destinations.



Figure 3. Map of Dalarna, the destinations of “Biking Dalarna”. Adapted from www.bikingdalarna.se

4.2 The destinations

Sälen

Sälen is the largest and most popular tourism destination in Sweden outside the big cities. There are approximately 50,000 beds for tourists and the tourism industry in Sälen had a turnover of 1.85 billion SEK in 2011 (invest in Dalarna, 2012). Sälen is a winter destination popular for downhill skiing and internationally known as the starting point of the Vasaloppet cross country race. As a distinct winter destination, Sälen suffers from seasonality and the local tourism organizations are eager to develop the summer season. The represent of the Sälen tourism office whom is in charge of the development of the “non-ski” season stated that for the coming season the focus is 100% on cycling and mountain biking. It is believed

to have great potential as tourist attraction. A number of cycling competition and events take place in Sälen during the months June-September, most famous of them all is the Cykelvasan which attracts 12,000 participants. The Cykelvasan is perceived as a great promoter to the biking destinations in Sälen.

Biking Dalarna's trails in Sälen are divided in five locations and operated by different companies and organizations. (1)The village of Sälen (2) Lindvallen, which is the largest ski resort owned by the international chain Skistar and offers a bike park for all levels (3) Kläppen, another very popular and established ski resort located 10 kilometers south of Sälen. (4) Rörbäcksnäs is a small village west of Sälen by the Norwegian border and considered to offer world class cross country biking and (5) the Vasaloppet arena which host the largest mountain biking competition the Cykelvasan. The variety of biking experience in Sälen is very wide; all four types of trails are available in different levels of difficulties. Table 4 below lists the different biking destinations by operator, ownership type, biking trails and other related offerings by the operator. The Biking Dalarna members in Sälen are organized in a local forum which operates parallel to their communication with the rest of the Biking Dalarna destinations. The Sälen members of Biking Dalarna represent Lindvallen(ski star), Kläppen resort, Vasaloppet, Rörbäcksnäs IF (nonprofit local sport association), Sälffjällstorget (an association of different companies near Lindvallen) and the Sälen Malung tourism office.

Table 4. Biking Dalarna destinations in Sälen

Destination	Operator	Ownership type	Biking trails(type, no, length)	Other offerings
Lindvallen	SkiStar	Commercial	Leisure 2(74km) Down Hill 7, Cross Country3(14km)	Accommodation, F&B, Lift access, Guidance, rental
Kläppen	Kläppen Resort	Commercial	Cross Country3(19.5km)	Accommodation, F&B, Rental, Guidance
Vasa arenan	IFK Mora and Sälen IF	Nonprofit sport club	Cross Country2(98 km)	Exist by other operators
Rörbäcksnäs	Rörbäcksnäs IS	Nonprofit sport club	Cross Country5(79km)	Exist by other operators
Sälen village	Sälen IF	Nonprofit sport club	Leisure 3(124km), Road 2(170km), Cross Country 4(47km)	Exist by other operators

Falun

Located in the biggest city of Dalarna, the Lugnet world championship arena is internationally known for hosting of the world cross country championship. It is Scandinavia's biggest sport and training venue and the home of national and international sport events and competitions. The complex, Lugnet is owned by the municipality of Falun and different private companies operate within its territory. The Lugnet nature reserve offers a large variety of outdoor recreational activities. Accommodation possibilities include the Lugnet Camping & Holiday Village, Lugnet Scandic hotel and a cheap alternative of sleeping in class rooms. Lugnet is located a short walking distance from the Falun center offering more accommodation, food and entertainment options (falun.se / Lugnet, 2012). For bikers,

Lugnet offers two cross country trails (22 km), three downhill trails (no lift) and one leisure trail (20km). More trails are under development. Additional biking services (rental and guidance) are provided by Lugnet outdoors.

The bike trails at Lugnet are visited mainly by locals, maintenance and trail building is done by volunteer members of local biking clubs. The Biking Dalarna members from Falun are from Lugnet (Falun municipality) and from Lugnet Camping & Holiday Village.

Säfsen

Located in the Municipality of Ludvika, Säfsen resort is the most southern of all Biking Dalarna destinations. Säfsen resort is a one stop destination offering a large variety of nature based outdoor activities year round. In the winter time, most activity surrounds downhill and cross country skiing while the rest of the year offers biking, hiking, paddling, fishing, horseback riding and more. Säfsen resort offers a conference center, a restaurant and bar and a total of 1400 beds in different types and standards. Säfsen has been a mountain biking destination for over 25 years, for bikers, Säfsen resort has a lot to offer. 350 km of cross country (13 trails), 8 downhill trails (with lift) for all levels, two road trail (96 km) and 35 kilometers of leisure cycling. The resort offers bike rental, guided tours for groups and cycle service facilities. There are also special biking holiday packages available. In Biking Dalarna, Säfsen is represented by Säfsen resort.

Idre

Idre is located at the very north of Dalarna right by the Norwegian border. Idre Fjäll, the resort on the mountain is a well-established winter and summer tourism destination with more than 7000 beds in cabins, hotels, camping sites and apartments. The activity options are numerous and on top of the nature based outdoor activities include also golf, paintball, a spa and an experience of the Sami culture. For bikers, there are two road trails (128km), three cross country trails (24 km) and two downhill (with lift) trails. Equipment rental is provided by a local sport shop, but requires pre booking. The resort also offers guided biking tours and biking instruction. In Biking Dalarna, Idre is represented by Idre Fjäll resort.

Rättvik

Rättvik is a small town located on the eastern shore of Lake Siljan. Since 1894, when the first tourist hotel was built there, Rättvik has been a popular summer destination and it offers a variety of accommodation and tourist attractions (Siljan.se/rattvik, 2013). The cycling activities are concentrated by Jarlstugan, the center of the local sport and outdoors association. Bicycle services and rental are available at the local sport shop; guided tours are operated by local private entrepreneurs. There are five cross country trails (44 km) and two leisure cycling trails (41 km). In Biking Dalarna, Rättvik is represented by IK Jarl, a nonprofit local sport association.

5. Findings

Motivations to join Biking Dalarna

Mountain biking and cycling activities were practiced in all of Biking Dalarna's destinations prior to the establishment of Biking Dalarna. All six participants, has mentioned to notice a significant growth in popularity of biking in the last few years. It was suggested that the growth is related to recent trends of promoting a healthy life style and environment friendly recreational activities. Aware to the growing demand for biking products, three participants stated to be looking for a way to increase their visibility. A representative of one of the smaller organizations has pointed that for their organization, being on the Biking Dalarna web-platform and its associated advertising possibilities is big and that alone they could have never afford it. In one participant's words

"The demand is out there and we needed a way to make ourselves seen and Biking Dalarna is perfect for that".

The desire to develop a biking into a better tourism product was also recorded as a strong motivation to join Biking Dalarna. The potential of Mountain biking as a pull factor and a tourist attraction for the summer months was recognized and repeated by the interviewees. In Sälen especially developing the non-ski season is a common goal for many of the local stakeholders. Being a part of Biking Dalarna was seen as an opportunity to develop biking into a quality tourism product and also as a natural continuation of their joint work in Sälen towards the creation of a summer season. The world class seminar held in Borlänge and the seminar leader from the 7 Stanes were attributed by the interviewees with much credit to the forming of Biking Dalarna. Three participants have mentioned the seminar as the trigger to convince them to join and develop the biking product. One member from Sälen highlights that the seminar really stressed the importance of collaborating and that from the start it was clear to him that the only way to do it was together.

"It (the seminar) gave us a feeling that we must do it in Sälen"

Interesting to note that beside the representatives of the tourism management organizations, all members of Biking Dalarna are enthusiastic mountain bikers. From the interviews it was clear that for them there is special interest and motivation in developing biking products, it is not just the potential profit that drives them. And in fact, as biking is not the main product of any of the members of Biking Dalarna, much of the initial work was done by the members on their free time with the help of volunteers.

When asked about barriers to join Biking Dalarna or hesitations to collaborate, all participants have answered that it was a very easy decision to take. The fact that Destination Dalarna was standing behind Biking Dalarna was said to provide a safe feeling. In a similar way also the fact that the biking product was to be developed by the model of the 7Stanes, renowned for its excellence, was mentioned to be reassuring and promising.

What do we get from it?

As mentioned before, biking was practiced in all destinations prior to the establishment of Biking Dalarna. Therefore it is interesting to investigate how collaborating with other destinations has changed the biking operations. For a start, the interviewees, who have participated in the study trip to Scotland, have found it very useful in showing them how it could and should be done in Dalarna. All participants have acknowledged the fact that biking as a product is better now than before Biking Dalarna. The signs and work that was put on the trails has improved the biking experience and safety. New trails were built to offer larger variety of biking experiences. There is more information about the trails and the product is more accessible for the costumers. As the interviews were conducted less than a year from the launch, it was difficult for the interviewees to determine any changes in demand that could be attributed to Biking Dalarna also other changes as better rental equipment are difficult to connect directly to Biking Dalarna, but there is a general notion of a change in approach and attention that biking receives.

“The main thing is that the product, the quality in how we look for our guests, everything is boosted thanks to Biking Dalarna”

Five interviewees have answered “learning from each other” when asked what do they get from collaborating with others. The participants’ answers portray Biking Dalarna as an open forum. A place for the members to share knowledge, learn together and discuss ideas.

“When you put it (personal knowledge) together in an open organization and everybody share their knowledge and let the others in, that is very important for the success. “

Another repeating answer was the notion of being stronger as a group. For example, members in Sälen have noted that being a part of collaboration makes it easier to approach landowners for the purpose of building bike trails and that the county administrative board are much more willing to cooperate now. The fact that Destination Dalarna, which is a part of the regional municipality, is standing behind the collaboration is perceived by the participants as highly valuable.

“It (being in collaboration together with Destination Dalarna) makes biking a legitimate product to develop!”

Another noted advantage is access to funding. Building biking trails and maintaining them in good conditions is costly, only lift access trails generate direct revenue for the trail operator (from lift tickets). Some of the members of Biking Dalarna are nonprofit organizations with limited budgets. For them, access to EU and regional funding through Destination Dalarna was crucial. Another example of how they benefit from collaborating was taking advantage of economies of scale, by ordering and designing together the trail signs the members have reduced costs.

One participant has noted that being a part of collaboration might have its downsides. That is that one might be limited to follow the priorities of the group as a whole and that arguably to

precious time is being spent on communication and meetings rather than in actual work (such as building the trails). However, the same participant has acknowledged the fact that being in a collaboration one must respect the common goals of the group. A second possible disadvantage mentioned was that the different destinations are not at the same stage of progress which might hinder the development of some destinations or rush the development of other. Other participants when asked if they share similar feelings have turned down these notions claiming that they feel no limitations to operate or develop at all.

Relationship

In all five face to face interviews, the participants were recorded to often use plural pronouns when talking about Biking Dalarna (we are in in together, we want to develop, we hope for...). This clearly indicates on a strong sense of commitment and solidarity. This notion is supported with statements such as

“Biking Dalarna, it is like a fairy tale, the best thing about it is that we work together,” And *“The best part is the people (in Biking Dalarna) are super enthusiastic about it and it really makes everybody motivated”*

Openness was another repeating concept when the interviewees were asked to describe the relationship and communication between the Biking Dalarna members. One participant has recalled being surprised how quickly everybody *“Let down their guards and let the others in”*. He related it to the fact that they all shared a common vision of lifting biking activities in Dalarna to a new level and aim how to attract more bikers to come and visit. One participant has suggested that maybe it was easy to share knowledge as there were limited defined goals and frame to the collaboration from the start. He adds that in Biking Dalarna, all members involved have something to gain from collaborating.

Coopetition

Four of the Biking Dalarna members are “one stop” resorts (Klätten, Säfsen, Idre Fjäll and Lindvallen) offering the complete tourism product: accommodation, food and beverages, activities, and rental equipment. Two of them are barely 20 minutes’ drive from each other and all have been competing for many years on the Swedish skiing market. By all aspects these four members are direct competitors. As part of the empirical data collection, representatives of two of these companies have been interviewed. The interviews revealed how much these companies value their competitors as benefactors to their own operation. They explained that biking as a tourism product is still not established. According to them, more operators offering quality biking products in Dalarna will lift the whole region as a biking destination. Even Skistar which is the largest ski company in Scandinavia was said to be too small to do it alone

“Off course they are competitors, but if we want to achieve our goals we need to put that a side. If they (the tourists) come to Dalarna and bike, they will come back”

This mature approach is valued as truly genuine and the representative of Skistar has sincerely expressed his disappointment that Klätten, its “coopitator”, would not be able to

offer lift access to trails in the coming season. Rather than celebrating being the only company to offer a bike park and downhill biking in Sälen it views it as a loss to the whole destination. He explained it as

“Biking is different than skiing in that matter, bikers who visit one destination would like to visit other destinations at the same trip, that is a goal and because of that by having each other we are more attractive”

And

“We motivate each other, we still want the tourists to come here (to our resort) but it is very possible for the tourists to visit both”

The different biking areas in Sälen are highly dependent. They are perceived as one network. The Sälen members have expressed their interest in more local businesses taking on biking products and helping to create a summer season this include also supplementary services such as hotels and restaurants that will decide to stay open during the summers. The interdependence of the Biking Dalarna members in Sälen is evident as the members with larger resources have taken upon them to pay the marketing budget share of Rörbäcksnäs, a non-profit organization. They simply believe that with Rörbäcksnäs their own operation is more attractive. The representative of the Sälen-Malung tourism office have suggested that the collaboration within Sälen, not only benefits the development of Biking tourism but in general improves collaboration within Sälen and sets an example for all local companies.

Biking Dalarna as a brand

When asked if they perceive Biking Dalarna as a brand, all interviewees have answered they do. However the findings suggest it is not the case. For a start, the logo of Biking Dalarna is hardly present in the websites and commercial material of the member companies. Neither is Biking Dalarna mentioned by text. The participants also admitted to rarely encounter the name Biking Dalarna outside the forum of their meetings. In an attempt to explain that, all participants have pointed out to the fact the Biking Dalarna is still young and so far almost all efforts were directed towards building the product and that marketing is the next step.

“We are building it up and try to promote it, it will get there, but we need to get people talk about it”

However there is a growing interest from other companies and destinations to join the collaboration which indicates that Biking Dalarna does create itself a name and reputation.

Destination Dalarna, the convener

Through all interviews, Destination Dalarna (DD), the regional tourism management organization, received a lot appreciation and credit for its work and contribution to Biking Dalarna and the development of biking tourism. Destination Dalarna was the initiator of the collaboration, the world seminar in Borlänge and the study trip to the 7Stanes (both organized by DD) were already mentioned for their contribution and for motivating participants to be a

part of Biking Dalarna. Although mountain biking was practiced in Dalarna prior to the collaboration, Destination Dalarna are credited for “*putting it all together*” and putting biking in the center of things. The work carried by the DMO was valued as saving a lot of time for the different destinations. It is attributed with coordinating and providing the basis for all communication within Biking Dalarna and for creating a forum for the members to exchange ideas. One interviewee described the contribution of Destination Dalarna as:

“Setting the infrastructure for us to be able to develop biking products (upon)”

The regional tourism manager and the representative of the Sälen-Malung tourism office were described as enthusiastic and driven. One interviewee has mentioned it as a real motivating factor adding that their approach projects on the whole project. Another contribution of Destination Dalarna mentioned by one participant was providing professional help for the non-commercial members of Biking Dalarna. Access to funds and dealing with official authorities and marketing Biking Dalarna outwards through fairs and Visit Sweden (the Swedish national DMO) were more advantages and contributions attributed to Destination Dalarna. One participant has interestingly suggested that by providing the funds to initiate the project, Destination Dalarna has allowed all members to meet as equals and prevented a situation of the ones with more resources making all the decisions. Destination Dalarna is also valued by the participants for the future development of Biking Dalarna. It is believed that the platform of Visit Dalarna is necessary to be able to connect the different destinations and package it as one tourism product. As one interviewee noted:

“The fact that destination Dalarna is behind it makes it possible”, I don’t think that there would have been Biking Dalarna without all the work of Destination Dalarna”

Additional findings

The different destinations attract different markets. In Falun, the large majority of the bikers are local people with the rest believed to be people who take tier hobby (biking) seriously and wish to improve their biking skills using the facilities and knowledge in Lugnet. In Säfsen, approximately 70% of the summer costumers come from the Netherlands (according to manager of biking activities in Säfsen) and while they do bike during their vacation, it is not the main pull factor. Sälen addresses mainly Swedish families, the same target market visiting Sälen during the winter time.

Generally, the interviewees thought that the conditions for Biking in Dalarna are good and that the different destinations offer enough variety to be interesting for bikers to try more than one destination and that the different biking trails cover the whole range of potential bikers from beginners and children to experts looking for technical riding. Above all, Rörbäcksnäs was recognized as a world class biking destination. Also the rental equipment and knowledge was valued as more than sufficient to be competitive. One participant, with a fair amount of mountain biking experience in different countries have said that he believes Dalarna has the potential to become a world class biking destination but, using the example of the 7Stanes, becoming a world class destination requires world class investments. All five interviewees have expressed their wish to see more companies and destinations joining Biking Dalarna.

However, one participant has conditioned that all new destinations must fulfill the quality standards of Biking Dalarna, stating that it could be a problem for the member organizations to be associated with companies offering inferior products.

Building biking trails and their maintenance are expensive. In contrast, the trails themselves do not generate revenue; it is free to bike all trails. Much of the maintenance and building work was noted to be carried by volunteers and local biking clubs. Other organization with revenue generating potential from Biking Dalarna and generally non-member companies along and value chain and companies that provides supplementary products (such as accommodation and food) have very little involvement and awareness to Biking Dalarna.

6. Discussion

Means to achieve competitiveness

This research explores collaboration as a means to increase destination competitiveness. One way for a tourism destination to become more competitive is to offer better tourism products. All the interviewed members of Biking Dalarna believe that the total biking experience offered in Dalarna is better at the beginning of the 2013 season than it was prior to the forming of Biking Dalarna: It is safer to ride, simpler to choose the right trail to ride and easier to find the right way on the trail. These improvements are the direct result of the new signage system designed through the collaboration. Another way the collaboration has directly improved the biking product is by setting standards. Each Biking Dalarna destination is required to provide cyclists and mountain bikers with a nearby accommodation, rental services and cycle wash. These ensure costumers that their basic needs will be fulfilled. The collaboration has also improved the biking product in less tangible ways. As mentioned in the findings section, since Biking Dalarna there is much more attention on development of biking tourism. While attention is difficult to measure and directly connect to the collaborated work, it is very likely to assume that the monthly meetings, the study trips and the focus biking has received within the collaboration has motivated the member organizations to improve the biking experience at their destinations. Another way the collaboration has contributed to the development of the biking product is through importing knowledge, the study trips and world class seminar 7Stanes (centrality) and distributing it in Dalarna through the monthly meetings (cohesion).

Problem solving is a second result of collaboration which leads to destination competitiveness (see figure 2). The problem of seasonality in winter destinations was discussed in previous sections. It would be wrong to suggest that Biking Dalarna could have solved seasonality problems in winter resorts in Dalarna and in Sälen in particular in its short duration of existence. However, the empirical findings and examples from other international winter destinations indicate that Biking tourism has the potential to mitigate the problem of seasonality. The collaboration also helps in solving additional biking related problems. As a group, the member organizations are in a better negotiation position with authorities and landowners for getting permissions for trail building and for the smaller member organizations, funds directed to the collaboration solved the cost problems of trails building and maintenance.

Beside product development and problem solving the conceptual framework section listed marketing attributes (creating a brand name, reaching larger markets and increasing visibility) as a result of collaboration which leads to destination competitiveness. Measuring changes in demand as a result of Biking Dalarna was not possible in the scope of this research and also the interviewed participants could not account for the contribution of Biking Dalarna to changes in demand. Marketing attributes were documented as a major motivation to join Biking Dalarna. In contrast to that, the empirical findings point that Biking Dalarna has yet to take advantage of the marketing potential of collaborating. Some advertisements and media coverage were published and also the member organizations have participated in trade fairs

representing Biking Dalarna. To judge the level of awareness to Biking Dalarna among potential customers and related companies a survey should be conducted. Such data was not collected in the scope of this research, however from the data collected in the interviews and through reviewing relevant websites, including of the member companies and of biking events in Dalarna, it appears that Biking Dalarna has yet to become a brand name among potential customers or related businesses. The collaborated work so far has been oriented towards product development and improvement and has been successful in doing so. This together with the promised basic services for bikers at Biking Dalarna destinations should be highlighted and communicated to the collective target market. Biking Dalarna should strive to become a quality status recognized by bikers and by other tourism organizations and destinations. By doing so it could fulfill the potential marketing advantages of collaboration. It should be noted that the empirical data was collected only a year after the launch of Biking Dalarna and that creation of brand name and development of marketing strategies could be the next step in the development of Biking Dalarna.

Contributing factors

The collaboration has contributed to the development and improvements of the tourism product, but what made the collaboration successful? The conceptual framework section discussed three main factors which enhance the strength of the collaboration and promote its success. The first was the relationship factor. The empirical findings portray Biking Dalarna as an open forum where the member organizations meet to share knowledge and discuss ideas. Within this forum there is a very high level of openness and trust. The interviewed members value the capabilities of their counterparts and are eager to share their knowledge with them, even when they are direct competitors. The close and mature relationship among the member destinations of Biking Dalarna has contributed much to the strength of the collaboration. The fact that the representative of the member organizations are all enthusiastic cyclists and for them is not only business but also pleasure and a common hobby is also believed to contribute much to the good nature of the relationship and the promotion of biking tourism in Dalarna. Other contributing factors are the shared vision and goal and the appreciation of interdependency. Even though no participant has mentioned it in the interviews, it is possible to suggest that the common trips to Scotland and visits to the 7Stanes has expedited the bonding of the group and promoted the opened and strong relationship. The stage in the product cycle and level of development prior to collaboration should also be considered as well as a factor influencing the strength of the relationship. The very open discussion, share of knowledge and healthy competition described would not have existed if the same organizations were to work together in the context of winter sport and skiing, an already well-established industry. It is also questionable if competing members will maintain their open approach and will to collaborate when it comes to joint marketing ventures, especially when the distance to the main target market (Swedish families) is relatively small.

With conditioned membership, shared vision and horizontal structure, Biking Dalarna fits the description of a network. Arguably, in order to increase the collaboration's potential in achieving its goals, Biking Dalarna should strive to raise the interest in developing biking tourism beyond the borders of the network and to create a broader cluster around biking

tourism. Strong cluster needs a critical mass of members and its success is depended on the relationship with other producers and related business along the value chain of the (tourism) product. The biking trails do not generate revenue (no entrance fees are collected beside lift passes in Säfsen and Lindvallen). This create a situation there some of the member organizations do not generate any direct revenue from the biking while other companies in the destination which have the potential to do so (hospitality, restaurants, rental and retail shops) are hardly involved in Biking Dalarna . There is no strong relationship between them and Biking Dalarna and these companies are not aware of the actions and plans of Biking Dalarna. This issue could be associated to the lack of brand recognition identified earlier, arguably involving more companies in Biking Dalarna will increase awareness and the more recognized Biking Dalarna would be as a quality status the more business will wish to be associated with it. This is how it works in Scotland there local associations of tourism and local businesses with the potential to generate revenue from biking tourism are represented in the board of the 7Stanes.

The second enhancing factor identified was the core resources and attractions. The development potential of a tourism product is limited by its natural attractiveness and investments. The findings suggest that the Biking Dalarna Destinations offer a good variety of trail types and levels, an important advantage for a biking destination. With the exception of Rörbäcksnäs which appears to be a very special biking destination, the participants could not describe the biking trails in Dalarna as real world class trails. However the destinations in Dalarna offer added value to the biking trails. In Falun the academic knowledge and sports labs at the Lugnet complex provide a unique opportunity for cyclists who wish to take their hobby to a higher level. In Säfsen and Idre it is the many outdoor activities on site. In Lindvallen Swedish families can find a bike park which is fantastic for beginners and children and includes free instruction. Rättvik located on the shore of Lake Siljan is an established summer destination offering all the associated advantages for the biking tourists. A very important contribution to the potential of biking tourism in Dalarna is local biking events and the Cykelvasan in particular. The popularity of the race and the international reputation of its winter version are extremely valuable and should receive much attention and be incorporated in the collective development of marketing the collaboration.

The convener factor was found to have a very important part in the success and existence of Biking Dalarna. The work of Destination Dalarna, the regional tourism organization, was so highly appreciated by the member organizations that many have noted that it would have never happened without it. The findings emphasize the ability of a good convener to create a framework for the collaboration to take place. There is nearly a complete match between the findings about Destination Dalarna and the role of the convener as discussed in the conceptual framework. The only possible exception is again related to promoting joint marketing ventures, an issue already discussed in this section.

It seems like much of the biking product development done so far in Dalarna is directly attributed to the work of Destination Dalarna and the representatives of the biking destinations which have personal interest in biking. Much of the work, especially in the beginning, was carried in their private time and with the help of local volunteers. In other

words, it was thanks to the people involved that Biking Dalarna the collaboration and the member destinations were developed. Demand, commitment and interest of local people are without a doubt important and create a good starting point for any development. But in the light of the challenge to generate revenue directly from the trails compared to the high cost of building and maintaining the trails the reliance in some of the Biking Dalarna destinations (Rättvik, Falun, Rörbäcksnäs) on the good will and motivation of volunteers and nonprofit association is problematic and not sustainable as a business model. Also public funds have limited duration and could not provide the needed investments beyond a certain point.

7. Conclusion

The aim of the research was to explore tourism collaboration process as a means of generating destination competitiveness. Through the case of Biking Dalarna, this research has investigated the mechanism of collaboration and the factors that contribute to its success. The theoretical part of this paper has constructed a conceptual framework and presented a simplified model of the process. The empirical data was collected through a series of in depth interviews with key members of the Biking Dalarna collaboration. The findings have demonstrated how through product development and promoting problem solution, the collaboration Biking Dalarna has improved the tourism (biking) experience in Dalarna and made it into a more competitive destination. The strong relationship within Biking Dalarna and the commitment and competence of the regional tourism organization and the Biking Dalarna members were identified as the most contributing factors to the formation and development of the collaboration.

The findings also pointed to the fact that the collaboration has yet to take advantage of the potential marketing benefits of collaborating. This might point to the fact that the Biking Dalarna as a collaboration in a process is now facing transformation into its next phase. To increase its marketing potential, it was suggested that Biking Dalarna should strengthen the cluster by creating a mass of companies which have the potential to generate profit out of biking tourism. These should be involved in the biking operation and planning and be proud to be a part of Biking Dalarna. In this way, Biking Dalarna will build itself as a brand and a quality status and will decrease its reliance on the work of volunteers.

The growing international demand for biking tourism, the biking resources (trails, knowledge and added value), the commitment and passion of the member organizations, the support of the regional tourism organization and the potential marketing benefits of collaboration promise a bright future for Biking Dalarna and the development of biking tourism in the region. In a paraphrase on this paper's title, so far the people and organizations in Biking Dalarna has been working together to bake the cake, now it is the time to decorate it put a cherry on the top and push it to the front of the display window.

Incoming tourism has significant socio economic importance for countries, regions and cities. Tourism has evolved to a highly competitive industry and tourism destinations must apply long term development strategies in order to remain in the game. The findings of this research provide support to the growing popularity of tourism collaboration as a tool for destination development. The research has demonstrated the potential of tourism collaboration to promote destination competitiveness through product development and problem solving. This research has focused on the contribution of three main factors to the success of tourism collaboration: the core resources, the relationship and the convener. This focus is believed to have practical use for destination management organizations. By focusing on the three factors, DMOs could identify potential collaboration projects (resources), understand their role as a convener and appreciate the value of relationships and trust within the local tourism cluster.

Further research

This research has presented how through collaborating different tourism organizations have promoted the competitiveness of Dalarna as a tourist destination. Collaboration is perceived as a process, Biking Dalarna is still in its early stages of development and therefore a follow up research and evaluation in the future is required to determine if the collaboration has achieved its goals and to investigate how it evolved over time. This will allow investigating if the different factors have different contributing weight at different stages of the collaboration. Due to the limitations mentioned previously, this research has concentrated on the supply side of Biking Dalarna. Further research of Biking Dalarna should also include customer perceptions and changes in demand which could be attributed to the collaboration. This could be valuable in illustrating a more holistic picture and determine if the perceived marketing advantages of collaboration, such as visibility and status, occur in practice.

Collaboration is a dynamic and cyclical process; it is constructed of different integrated stages. This research has identified and explored the different factors which affect the outcomes of tourism collaboration. The findings from this research could be further developed to investigate the relevance of these factors to the different stages of the collaboration process. To analyze how each factor affects the collaboration at its different stages.

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