

47 Niches in tourism- how do the entrepreneurs learn and interact?

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While the tourism industry pre-pandemic was steadily growing worldwide, it has often been portrayed as a sector with challenges tied to knowledge development and innovation. This has been explained by the industry being dominated by small and medium sized businesses, high levels of labor turnover, challenges tied to seasonality, rapid changes of ownership and lack of dedicated career ladders (Hjalager, 2002). The nature of the tourism experience makes cooperation necessary in the industry, but the small scale of the businesses means limited resources for network cooperation. The fragmentation of the industry may also halt cooperation, as it consists of entities of different scales from different areas, that hinders communication and knowledge transfer (Czernek, 2017).

Instead of trying to cover the whole of a fragmented industry, this research will examine knowledge development in businesses that offers similar products. Aldrich and Fiol (1994) use the concept of organizational populations to describe groups of organizations with similar products and/ or processes. Research on knowledge transfer in tourism indicate that businesses with similar product products has the potential for more specific learning, and more direct imitation (Weidenfeld et al, 2010:610), and that product similarity is positively related to exploitative knowledge transfers resulting in innovation (Weidenfeld et al, 2010; Sørensen, 2007).

Aldrich and Fiol (1994) argue that new populations struggle with challenges of organizational knowledge development and legitimacy. This is tentatively supported by findings from research on different adventure tourism activities (Løseth, 2014). Through research question 1 the aim is to learn more about how a population evolves, and thus provide important input on how and where authority means can be placed:

Research question 1: How does challenges concerning product maturity influence knowledge development in the businesses?

The case of this study is the niche of mountain guiding in Norway. While mountain guiding in Norway has its roots back in the 18th Century, the development of businesses offering mountain guiding year-round is fairly new. The providers are still few, providing a lucid material for research on the ongoing processes.

In a fragmented industry it is expected that actors will find different networks and forms of corporations relevant for their business development. In a theoretical review, Høegh-Guldbrandsen and Fuglesang (2016) discuss five such forms of cooperation: Dyadic relations, innovative communities of practice, social networks, destinations and systems of innovation. Research question 2 will examine cooperation in the niche of mountain guiding:

Research question 2. What characterizes cooperation and knowledge development in the niche, and what sources of knowledge and forms of cooperation are experienced as important for the actors?

12 interviews were conducted with guides and owners of mountain guiding businesses in Norway. The sampling was in part snow-balled as an early pilot interview in the spring of 2017 with a guide who has worked extensively in the industry and has held different positions in industry-relevant organizations gave access to his network. 11 interviews were conducted face-to-face, one digitally. In order to accomplish a broad understanding of change processes taking place in the mountaineering industry, the strategically chosen interview sample includes guides and owners who have been working in the industry for decades as well as guides and owners that are fairly new to the industry. The sample includes guides from four different mountain regions in Norway. Content analyses was used to organize and analyze the material.

Findings, research question1. In line with Aldrich and Fiol (1994) the findings suggest that product maturity affect cooperation and knowledge development in the mountain guiding businesses.

While mountain guiding has a long history in Norway, this type of guiding has been centered around a few “trophy mountains”. Starting up a guide business in a mountain region with little or no history of this type of activity, means a different set of challenges for the entrepreneurs. Here, entrepreneurs must to a greater degree build knowledge and legitimacy locally and regionally, than entrepreneurs in mountain regions more familiar with this type of economic activity. The lack of product knowledge and legitimacy is also reflected in tourism projects that are experienced as having little relevance for the mountaineering business.

Findings research question 2. The material reveals a strong identity tied to being a mountain guide and strong ties to other actors within mountaineering businesses. This was reflected in high levels of cooperation with other mountaineering businesses, were guides travel to different mountain areas and work both for their own company as well as for others. This fluidity

ensures knowledge is being transferred not only regionally, but also nationally and internationally.

The characteristics of the mountain guiding niche make Wenger’s theory of communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) highly relevant, were in this case knowledge is being developed and centered around the craft of mountain guiding. The community of mountain guides is a valuable source of knowledge, identity and support, but the role of boundary spanners (Newell, et al, 2009) is also obvious in the material.

At the policy level, Wenger and Snyder (2000:140) describe the challenges of interfering and supervising the spontaneous and informal communities of practice. Instead of traditional projects tied to knowledge management, different ways of cultivating the community may be more a more fruitful path.

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