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Destination image formation.

Case study of the Lena Pillars nature park

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Foreword

My personal interest in nature tourism in destination of Lena pillars, the UNESKO Heritage site, finds its inspiration in my background. I grew up in the southern district of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) that is primarily known for its flat landscape; valleys and agricultural fields. But only 4 hours down by the Lena river brings you to bank with stretch of the Lena pillars, as it is the expected scenery on the route from my homeland to Yakutsk - the capital of the republic. As a master student within the tourism academical education and bachelor degree in Arctic adventure tourism I have a strong interest in understanding the potential for development of the tourist destination at the main nature-based heritage destination in Yakutia.

Abstract

Tourism is an industry that entirely depends on the people making decision to choose specific destinations based on different motivations.

This research is aimed at investigating the influences that can potentially create a negative effect on the destination image of Lena Pillars Nature Park. It will explore the stages of the destination image within first-time tourists throughout three interviews. The chosen research method was qualitative method, with collecting the data by conducting semi-structures interviews and open-end questionnaires. The findings were presented in three categories of pre-visit image, experience immersion stage and post-image components. The main finding of the study is the expectation of the tourists to come only for one-time visit and therefore build the expectation of receiving the full-time experience all at once.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background for the study

Early start of the international tourism within the Russian Federation has been established after the fall of Soviet Union in the late 90s and has opened the opportunity for each federal object to invest into development of the tourism field.

Yakutia, former YSSUR (Yakut Socialist Soviet Union Republic), has welcomed the first visitors primarily from former Soviet Union and has stayed comparatively low on the international tourism map mainly due to a very low-profile status as a potential destination. The reason was that it has not yet accumulated an image as a place to visit and did not develop distinguished features that would put it into spotlight and would allow to recognize this remote northern area on a map (Zamorshchikova, 2018).

Tourism research in the last fifty years have traced the undisputable correlation between the perception of the destination and the decision to visit a place. The way the place is promoted or simply made recognizable is one of the most important parts in tourism that make the place attractive for visitors (Gunn, 1972; Jenkins, 1999; Beerli and Masrtin 2004).

Yakutia as a destination have announced itself for international world through the discovery shows on National Geographic and BBC that focused on its extreme weather conditions and as a place for tough challenge, survival and pristine wilderness. It later on shaped the perception of the whole republic and placed it in a list of extreme and eccentric travels (Totonova, 2014).

Thus, the specific features of the location might also affect the specifics of who are the visitors. Muller and Jansson (2006) note that the visitors who chose northern destinations usually define it as a place of mystery and unknown, distant and unexplored.

According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999), destination image – the perception of a place - has a direct correlation between the demographic, economic, educational, and individual

psychological states of individual tourists, and the specific traits of a destination's representation used by information sources.

And as mentioned, by representing Yakutia as extreme and challenging, the primary market of international tourism has put a label on it, and as everything labeled, it leaves out of notion some hidden treasures.

The northern area of Yakutia that was channeled through the worldwide media is only a part of the vast location that the republic covers. And among several touristic spots that include cultural heritage sites such as concentration camp historic destination, abandoned golden and diamond mines, there is one other destination that the National Tourism Agency of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) set on a special focus and which was chosen as a subject of this study.

The chosen geographical area for this research was the Lena Pillars, which is a natural rock formation found along the banks of the Lena river. From a touristic perspective, despite the fact that the Lena Pillars are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage place, due to the Pillars' climatic conditions, the destination is comparatively neglected. The continental part of Yakutia is located within the continental sub-Arctic climate zone, which is characterized by its severe annual temperature amplitude (102.8°C). It is known for its radical cold temperatures in the winter season, which can reach -60°C (the last record of -78°C in the North Pole was in 2021) and +40°C in the summertime. Thus, the various seasonal conditions draw a drastically different picture of the site depending on the season. Due to a lack of governmental financial support, local touristic companies that deliver nature based-experiences at the site are left to take full control over promotional activities of the destination. In order to do so it is necessary to take a discourse into concept of a destination image.

1.2 Tourism destination image

The concept of destination image is a complex field of overlapping studies of marketing, consumer behavior, local infrastructure evaluation, branding and service management. The term, "destination image", can be defined as complex criteria that create an overall perception or "impressions of a place ... mental portrayal of a destination" (Jalivand,

Samiei, Dini & Manzari, 2012, p. 134), or as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Jenkins, 1999, p. 18).

The development of a destination's image is essential for the successful implementation of marketing and management strategies, expansion of customer markets and the positioning of the destination in touristic markets. As a concept of influence in several sections of business, it is necessary to understand and evaluate destination image during concept forming processes.

Previously, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) developed a frame for destination image evaluation wherein they divided factors into two groups: personal and stimulus influence. Personal factors are affected by background, individual perception and interpretation, and according to Baloglu and McCleary (1999), have a direct connection with the age, education and socio-psychological conditions of the observer/tourist. Stimulus factors are defined by all the various forms of information as well as the tangible experience of interaction and connection with a destination, which includes previous visitation, media sources and the type and amount of information connected to a destination to which a person has been exposed. As a consequence of the combination of the aforementioned factors, an individual tourist develops an overall destination image.

According to Beerli and Martin (2004), with respect to decision making, there are certain traits associated with the influence of personal and stimulus factors regarding a destination's image. For example, it is more common for first-time visitors to rely on cognitive factors. However, second-time or frequent visitors tend to rely more on affection based on their personal experience of a destination during their first visit.

Such factors were very important in framing the research conducted with respect to the Lena Pillars Nature Park.

As was revealed in the 2019 research conducted by the National Tourism Agency of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), over 75% of tourists visiting the Lena Pillars were first-time tourists; and therefore, further research on its destination image was essential for the further development of tourism strategies in the Republic of Sakha.

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We live in the abundance of an information era, and as such it is essential for geographically challenged locations – such as those involved in Arctic tourism - to manage destination image formation processes via social media and other potential information sources. This includes the process of investigating possible positive and negative influences to build effective marketing strategies and successful targeting and management of potential visitors.

For this Master's thesis research, the concept of destination image is applied to the specific location of the Lena Pillars Nature Park. It therefore addresses the need to understand destination image formation phenomenon in circumstances of limited resources and remote geographical position.

1.3 Research question

The research was conceptually framed within the stages of destination image formation of the National Park of the Lena Pillars. The case field work was conducted among tourists visiting during the summer season of 2020.

The aim of the research was to investigate *what would be the possible unsatisfactory components of the destination image of the Lena Pillars Nature Park for the first-time visitors that affect an intention to revisit and to recommend?*

The theoretical purpose and relevance of the research are to contribute to the research of destination image formation at heritage sites in remote geographical destinations.

The practical purpose of this aim is to further apply the result into marketing strategy and business management areas of Lena Pillars Nature Park in order to positively affect the destination image and to improve a delivery of the service quality.

In order to be able to investigate such influences it is important to follow the processes of image formation. The process of destination image formation consists of several stages, often subdivided into three: 1) formation of the pre-visit image 2) participation at the

destination and 3) formation of the post-visit image.

In order to investigate the matter, the following research objectives were chosen:

- Conduct 2 semi-structures interviews one the preparation and post-visitation stage and one field-note questionnaire for experience immersion stage.
- Analyze the factors that influenced the perception of interviewees on different stages.
- Analyze major challenges indicated by respondents for the destination image of the Lena Pillars Nature Park.

Master thesis structure

This thesis is divided into six chapters.

The first chapter consists of the introduction to the concept of destination image; the process of destination image formation and factors influencing that process; the importance of the study and its relevance for the tourism destination area; as well as the formation of the research question and objectives.

The second chapter consists of reviews of extant literature regarding the theoretical bases of the concept, destination image, its components, the process of its formation, influencing factors and evaluation of destination images.

The third chapter is dedicated to the methodology, and reflects on the philosophical and methodological approach chosen for this study. It presents the background information of the location and destination that was chosen as the context and locating frame for this research; a brief introduction to the specifics of the nature tourist concept as it is defined as a potential target segment for Lena Pillars visitors; and the data collection and analysis process that reflects further on the context and location of the study. The chapter also includes reflections on ethics and challenges imposed on the timing of the research.

The fourth chapter consists of the presentation of the findings.

The fifth chapter discusses the findings.

The last, the sixth chapter provides concluding remarks.

Chapter 2. Theory chapter

2.1 Previous research

The early notion of a destination image was discovered a little over five decades ago. As noted by Baloglu and McClearly (1999), initial research into the concept of destination image was undertaken in the 1950s by Boulding and Martineau (1956; 1958). They discovered that a destination's image was of primary importance as customers/tourists were affected mostly by image as opposed to more objective and tangible criteria.

Further research on the concept was published in the seventies by Gunn (1972) who focused on the correlation of destination image and tourists' purchase processes. Based on the results of his research, Gunn developed seven stages of image modification. This attempt was one of the major breakthrouth moments in creating a systematic approach for contemplating the phenomenon. Building on Gunn's work, Chon (1991) researched the impact on destination image by actual visitation to a destination using the example of American tourists in South Korea. As a result of this study using Gunn's seven stages, Chon introduced the concept of pre- and post-visit differences as modifiers to a destination's image.

In his work, Chaudhary (2000) studied the difference in perception of the tourist in pre- and post-visit stages in India by conducting a survey used prior to travel and after visitation. The findings of differences in tourist perception and expectations were analyzed to identify the correlation between the expected experience and fulfillment of those expectations. This led to further conversation regarding the challenges present in the process of forming a destination's image.

This research is particularly interesting as it allows to the researcher to divide the process of formation in a much more organized and simplified manner which also leads to an easier implementation of the findings into marketing and administration fields. Therefore, Chaudary's (2000) work has established the theoretical basis for this study that adopted pre- and post-visiting stages investigation of a destination image.

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In 2002, Pike (2002) and Gallarza, Saura and Garcia (2002) conducted studies to review research dedicated and related to the concept of destination image. Pike´s work contained reviews of 142 studies (1973-2000) and Gallarza et.al. overviewed 65 studies (1971-1999).

Based on their analyses, there was a clear inclination in the studies towards quantitative research methods. This was justified by the earlier correlation of destination image to market research aimed at investigating customer behavior, purchase intentions and buying decision processes. However, there is an obvious lack of qualitative research focused on the study of the conception and formation of destination image.

As Echtner and Ritchie (2003) emphasized, qualitative approaches are highly advisory in framing investigations of destination image challenges and issues, specifically if applied in combination with semi structured techniques for a broader analysis of the subject.

The latest study that reviewed extant literature on the concept of destination image was conducted by Sánchez and Serrano (2020), whose research focused on articles published in "Science Direct" between 1997 and 2008. The researchers stated that although early studies concentrated on investigating the importance of destination image for potential customers, studies in later years took a wide variety of directions as a result of mainly considering the concept in relation to other disciplines. Sánchez and Serrano distinguished three main categories such as the evolution of destination image in stages: pre-visit, immersion, post-visit; motivation and satisfaction's correlation to intention to revisit and/or recommend; the impact of marketing strategies; and social media's influence on motivation. The number of works in the mentioned categories extended to 484 articles.

In this thesis, I was informed by the existing theoretical base, which was primarily conducted using quantitative methods. Adopting a qualitative approach, I thus contributed to addressing the lack of research open to qualitative approaches especially with regard to the concept of destination image, and particularly the matter of destination image issues.

Based on the research of Baloglu and McCleary (1999) who studied the components influencing the process of destination image formation and identified them as affection and stimula, i.e., affectual and cognitive attributes, I have further investigated towards the attributes of the destination image concept. Herein cognitive attributes are personal views, beliefs, and basic knowledge and associative images connected to it; whereas affectual attributes are personal feelings and emotions associated with a destination.

These components have been taken into closer investigation by several researchers and are demonstrated in the further sub-chapter.

2.2 Destination image

As a concept, "destination image" is employed in the various overlapping disciplines of geography, sociology, anthropology and marketing; its definition is observed in a variety of formulations in different contexts with different objectives.

As the objective of defining the concept is a pursuit to understand the complexity of its meaning, the definition of "destination image" has been extended and reformulated in various research studies. The variety of disciplines in which the concept is implied, affects its prospects and focus.

Jenkins (1999) elaborated that the term's purposes adjusted to various disciplines, thus "image" encompasses visual phenomena in psychology; in geography and anthropology, it focuses on the complexity of visual, sensual, informational knowledge and cultural attributes. Whereas in a marketing framework, since it directly correlates to customer behavior, it addresses the perception of a product by potential/prospective customers, i.e., perceptions of a destination by potential visitors.

Echtner and Ritchie (2003) elaborated on the work of Jenkins (1999) by reflecting on McCinnis and Price´s (1987) research work on destination image, specifically, a detailed decomposing of the concept of image into attributes of holistic and fragmented components.

The phenomenon of imagery is a capability of the human mind to perceive inputs of visual, audio, textual etc. information. It involves the process of analyzing the perceived fragments of information and storing it as a complete impression. This perspective is best defined by Dichter (1985), who said that the "image is not only individual traits and qualities, but the total impression an entity makes on the minds of the others" (p. 78).

Due to the complex multidimensional nature of the concept, it surely implies several perspectives. Thus, in addition to holistic/individual fragments of components, the measurement of image is assessed by psychological/functional attributes as well as common/unique features applied to the concept of the destination image. This includes the psychological/affectional characteristics of the destination that may influence customers'/visitors' decisions and impressions towards the location or tourism company in addition to the functional attribute of the place or the business (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003).

If taking the approach of viewing the group of components as separate dimensions, we have three dimensions of measurement for the concept: functional/psychological; common/unique; and, attributes/holistic.

Thus, a scale was developed for the measurement of the functional/psychological components and their interrelation. Here Etchner and Ritchie (1993) took the unit of measurement with respect to the tangibility of its attributes. Visitors were able to evaluate the number of activities and historical sites provided by a destination; as well as the type and quality of the entertainment industry in the area; the variety of restaurants and accommodation. Attributes which were less accessible for objective measurement included crowdedness, safety, cleanliness, political stability and urbanization, and unique cultural features, communication and hospitality of local populations. Highly challenging for evaluation purposes were atmosphere and other individually defined characteristics.

The second dimension of measuring destination image is the component of unique/common attributes. The evaluation of common attributes is challenged by the tangibility of their characteristics. Common attributes refer to the measurement of features that are related to the image of the location. Therefore, this dimension progresses

from measuring common features such as price, infrastructure, quality of service, safety, specific aura and social environment. However, throughout the period of research dedicated to the subject, standardized criteria have not been developed for evaluation purposes.

Nevertheless, unique attributes are the simplest to elaborate. As for the unique symbols of location, the functional features of this component are provided by widely known sights such as Niagara Falls and Mount Fuji, or famous buildings including Big Ben, The White House and Hermitage. This dimension progressively extends to less tangible concepts such as unique auras and social environments, for example, religious monuments like the Western Wall, Buddha statues, and the spiritual perception of locations as the Mekka, the Vatican and the Ashrams in India. The unique features of a location can appear as a result of a successful marketing strategy for example in Finland´s Santa Klaus village or the USA´s Disneyland.

The third dimension of destination image measurement is the component of perspective, this focuses on measuring the independent attributes and through a collective structuring of individual features creates the overall holistic perspective.

The process of combining components and their symbiosis creates an overall picture, which is defined as destination image formation (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993). This process is the theoretical frame of this study and therefore has been looked closer divided into stages and attributes.

2.3 Destination image formation

Destination images form in the minds of individual people. The process starts from the moment a person is initially exposed to information regarding a destination, or recognizes a certain place based on information, emotion or attitude.

Attempts to develop a model for destination image formation processes have been undertaken by several researchers. Through sequential modification of preliminary

research, several suggestions have been developed regarding the stages of destination image formation.

According to Jenkins (1999), one of the attempts to create a model of destination image formation was pursued by Stabler (1988) wherein he elaborated on the aforementioned dimensions of destination image components. Additionally, Stabler noted how common functional features of a place may create unique affectional perceptions and vice versa. Though the perceptions of individuals are unique, there are certain common characteristics across all visitors to the same destination due to similar factors influencing tourists.

Undeniably, the biggest contribution to conceptual research related to destination image in tourism and the process of its formation was made by Baloglu and McCleary (1999). The conception of destination image formation distinguishes two factors that participate in the process of creating a destination's image in the mind of an individual. The initial base for the start of the process is immensely affected by the socio-psychological factors of individuals, including the two factors of age and education which proved to be crucial in forming the overall image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Relatedly, Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi (2001) suggested and strongly insisted in their research regarding American tourists' intentions to visit Turkey, that an additional sub-division needed to be created within the segments of age and education for the subcategory of the difference in values, motivations and lifestyles.

In the quantitative research of Baloglu and McCleary (1999), informants were selected on the basis of their interest in the destination the researchers had chosen for their research. Consequently, informants were defined as prospective/potential customers. However, the research concluded by encouraging the conduct of similar research on the basis of informants who initially did not express an interest in the chosen research destination. Noteworthy is the correlation of stimula factors, or i.e., perceptive/cognitive factors, which influence affectional attitudes and therefore influence overall destination image. A major influence of the quantity of information to which informants were exposed prior to interviews created a deviation from an initial non-disturbed image of a destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999).

Prior to this study, Gunn (1972) defined the process of destination image formation as the never-ending process of modification of mental pictures, by adjusting them to newly absorbed information connected to a destination. He proposed that the process of destination image moved through seven stages:

1. Mental picture of destination created
2. The picture is modified by additional information
3. Decision made to travel to the destination
4. Travel
5. On-site experience
6. Return to initial circumstances
7. The picture is modified by personal experience.

Subsequently, the beginning of Gunn's destination image formation process is framed by giving the location acknowledgment of existence and recognizing initial characteristics of identification, otherwise defined as organic image. Later, with the motivation to consider the location for a potential visit, the individual discovers additional information through various sources and channels of information. Exposure to the latter, through the process of assessing and analyzing new information, an organic image transforms into the induced image which becomes the decision-making stage for purchase and travel intention. Travel and exposure to the experiences on-site are also parts of information influence on the induced image. It is still an ongoing process of image transformation. As the tourist returns home to the circumstances of daily life, the image is transformed into a modified-induced image (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003).

Beerli and Martin (2004) in their research on factors affecting destination image formation, investigated the correlation and influence of attributes and conditions on the process. Relying on the research of Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Beerli and Martin (2004) modified the sequence of influencing factors, by suggesting that cognitive perception not only affected the overall image at the same level as affectual perception, but also influenced the latter and thus made a bigger impact on creating the overall image.

Based on research by Gartner (1993), Beerli and Martin (2004) investigated more closely various information sources and divided the sources into primary and secondary categories. Wherein primary is the actual individual experience connected with prior experience and its characteristics, and secondary is subdivided into five types of information:

1) Overt induced (directly influenced by marketing and advertising)
2) Covert induced (involving the personas of authority and reputation in promotion)
3) Autonomous (mass media information about the location in movies, television, etc.)
4) Organic (natural social influence by family, friends, and acquaintance experience)
5) Personal visitation.

Yet, it is difficult to separate the induced information received from marketing, covert induced i.e., influenced by a reputable person, autonomous information which is received by mass media, organic image influenced by personal network and personal impressions from visitation. Across the stages of image formation, an overall image is formed by the time the tourist has returned home and reflected on all the sources of information, both cognitive and affective. Due to the complexity of all the components and the inability to track and predict the effect of each on a group or individual, it is later quite challenging to distinguish and correlate which factors made distinct impressions. Or to correlate them to the factors of influence involved in the location and experience to which the person was exposed at the destination. This is especially so for second-time visitors because they already have a distinct overall image as a result of their first-time visits.

All of the above-mentioned sources and channels of the information are defined as destination image formation agents. And as was mentioned above earlier, in the case if this study, the first international and national wide spread information about the destination of Yakutia was through the documentary movies of the educational channels such as BBC and National Geographics (Totonova, 2014). This particular source of the informational has earlier been discovered as cross componential due to being based on marketing (f.e. product placement market), influenced by a reputable person due to famous actors and media people involved into movies, and being an autonomous source as a mass media source.

Kim and Richardson (2003) have discovered in their quantitative research the lasting effect of the movies dedicated to setting a spotlight to the location. The respondents have kept both the informational and emotional focus of the movies towards the destination. The research by Shani (et. al., 2009) also indicated the higher levels of influence of the pre-visit destination image due to movies creating stronger affectional impressions and simultaneously being of cognitive, informational nature.

Therefore, the mentioned source influences are presented primarily for first-time visitors. As noted in the studies of several researchers such as Gunn, Echtner and Ritchie, Gartner, Pearce etc., the influence of the affectional attribute on an experience is immense, and the length, intensity and variation of experiences on-site create more holistic, unique attachments than those who are less familiar, and therefore rely more on common functional features.

2.4 Image evaluation

Satisfaction is vital for furthering a desire to revisit or to promote visitation to other potential visitors through personal connection or social media. Thus, satisfaction is one of the factors that is an active influence on prospective visitors' destination images.

The evaluation of satisfaction, as part of the individual factors component, is directly connected with the factor of motivation. Martin and Beerli (2004) reviewed the works of Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Stabler (1995), Um and Crompton (1990) and Gartner (1993). Martin and Beerli found that motivation has an inseparable correlation with the affective component, and therefore influences the overall image of a destination. The nature of motivation defines the range of experiences and preparation for experiences that implies an overlapping influence on stimula factors as well.

Kim and Richardson (2003) say that one of the main forces to affect motivation to travel is familiarity. As tourists gain more knowledge and become familiar with a destination, the bigger the possibility is for them to get to know about vacation opportunities there. It is very natural for people to choose places and make decisions regarding travel that

provides safety and comfort. The feeling of familiarity is closely connected with the perception of control and security, and controlled circumstances are interpreted as being safe and reliable.

Yet, it is necessary to manage the concept with caution. Authors warn of the concept of "optimal familiarity" introduced by MacKay and Fesenmaier (1997). Such familiarity gives a specific frame for the implications of the concept. If a destination is perceived as familiar over an optimal index, it might lose the perception of attractiveness due to a loss of novelty and anticipation of something new. Therefore, it might have a negative effect on motivation forming processes.

Tan and Wu (2016) explored the concept of familiarity and safety using two approaches: perception of safety and security as a cognitive attribute; and secondly by investigating and studying the concept of risk separately from the destination image component, albeit as a construct that influences destination image. They addressed the importance of the correlation between the cognitive destination component and risk management. This was because the attribute of experience in the cognitive component significantly influences the motivation to travel and decision-making processes. Thus, there is often a direct correlation between experience-based familiarity (personal experience or described from a trustworthy information source) and choice of destination.

The concept of familiarity develops a wider area for the development of motivation framing categorizations. People who are planning to travel and explore the market often have a distinct idea of the type of travel they want to take: leisure, business, emergency, education, pilgrimage, events and so on. The choice of travel type often defines the characteristics of purpose and motivation. It is important to identify these characteristics in order to focus on the core value of specific types of travel. For example, travel for business would have a focus on the time, convenience and logistics of a trip. Leisure travel has different motivations, and therefore to deliver the core value of such travel; it is necessary to consider the attributes of travel that will make the experience satisfactory (Holloway and Humphreys, 2012).

The correlation between motivation and satisfaction was investigated in-depth by Bigne et al.'s (2001) research of tourism image variables and their connection to post travel

behavior. The researchers postulated that perceived quality was a major motivation for any further decision to visit a place, participate in an experience and the fulfillment of satisfaction. The latter is the basis for the affective component which is directly connected with the formation of overall destination image; and is indirectly connected with prospective visitors through the formation of an organic image via the seven stages described by Gunn (1973).

The concept of satisfaction/dissatisfaction in tourism was earlier researched by Richard Oliver (1980). The difference between the two is simply outlined between the expectation of pre-travel perceived quality: if expectations are met satisfaction results, failure to meet the expectations of clients in regard to a perceived induced image of the destination results in dissatisfaction, thereby affecting the overall picture of a destination.

The paradigm of the connection between motivation and satisfaction after visiting a desired destination is based on Gunn´s model of destination image formation. One draws the line of the process of destination image formation in the individuals´ mind by forming the destination image on a basis of initial recognition of a destination. It is recognized by characteristic features and based on its attractiveness for an individual, therein the motivation to visit is formed. Later, an individual forms an expectation through the process of inducing an image based on information about the destination. According to Pizam and Milman (1993), the intention to revisit would be an indicator of the satisfactory formation of an overall destination image.

In correlation with the customer behavior and marketing research, it leads to a wide area of interest for marketers of destinations to conduct studies on destination image formation in pre- and post-travel stages.

In my research project I wanted to investigate the negative traits of destination visitation that might affect the paradigm of the perceived image and satisfaction with respect to expectations. I discuss further philosophical and methodological approaches applied in my study in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Context and location

Yakutia is an indigenous Arctic republic in the Far Eastern part of the Russian Federation. The major foci of development are its mining and lumber industries. However, its tourism sector remains challenged by Yakutia's geography, climate and accessibility. But there is a steadily increasing interest in travel to northern areas, particularly those that are perceived to be mysterious and "unexplored" by mass tourism (Muller and Jansson, 2006). Subsequently, the republic has received international interest from major adventure mass media broadcasting channels such as the BBC and National Geographic, which has generated further interest from individual travelers (BBC, National Geographic).

The development of tourism in the republic dates to the beginning of perestroika (a socio-economic and political transformation inside the Russian Federation). Since then, the republic has moved through bouts of decreasing and increasing demand for tourism services due to instability in the economic state of the country. And, in the latest decade, such instability has continued because of the country´s politics in international arenas.

Somnex and Sirakaya (2002) addressed the importance of the overall image of a geographical location in tourism. They identified a correlation between positive destination image with economic success of the tourism industry. They stated that positive destination images are a valuable asset for tourism industries at an attraction, city, region and country level.

Tourism in the republic is often subdivided into three categories by the Tourism agency of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia): domestic, federal and international. Wherein domestic tourism indicates travel within the republic by local citizens. Federal tourism involves travel by citizens from other federal districts; and international tourism draws people from outside the Russian Federation.

According to market analysis from 2015 up to 2018, the majority of tourists, who registered as traveling in the republic were domestic tourists (61%). During that time,

there was a stable increase in federal tourism (24.5%). The rest were international tourists (14.5%), where there had also been a consistent increase over the five year period (Totonova, 2019).

In 2015, the Tourism Ministry of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) announced an initiative to develop federal and international tourism by subsidizing tourism development areas along with providing support to local tourism agencies.

The focus of tourism in Yakutia can be divided into the principles of 5Es: ecology, ethnos, extreme, exotic, and exclusive. According to the federal statistics of the Tourism Ministry, annually around 5,000 international and 9,000 thousand federal tourists visit the republic. The primary interests of these tourists are the well-preserved ethnic culture and exotic extreme climate. One of the most popular tourist destinations that provides eco-tourism on the basis of unique natural conditions and ethnic culture is the national park of Lena Pillars (Zamorshchikova et al., 2018).

3.2 "Lena Pillars" geological and ecological importance

"Lena Pillars" National Park is a territory that is classified for environmental, historical and cultural preservation. The park is supervised by the Ministry of Nature Protection in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The park surrounds the area along the Lena River and spreads dozens of kilometers along the shore and inland, with massive formations of "rock pillars, pillars, steeples, towers with niches, passages, caves" (Likhachev, 2010 p. 5). The nature park was founded in 1995 in order to preserve the complex system of unique natural landscape and cultural heritage; and later, to utilize it for recreational, educational, scientific and cultural purposes.

The location of Lena Pillars is considered to be an historical cradle for Yakut people. Within the national park's territory evidence has been found dating from the Neolitic age, the "Dawn of time" of Yakut ancestors.

In 2012, the nature park "Lena Pillars" was included in the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list. The park was recognized because of the world-wide historical value of its

mineral carbonates monuments resulting from the Cambrian explosion, the evolutionary period, that contains evidence of "pivotal points in the Earth's life evolution… The "Lena Pillars" comprises the earliest and the largest, in both temporal and spatial senses, fossil metazoan reef of the Cambrian world. This reef being a site of Cambrian diversification is comparable to the Great Barrier Reef in the modern world" (Likhachev, 2010 p.7). Another reason relates to its great aesthetic beauty of largely spread massive rock formations that has no analogue.

Currently, the nature park actively promotes the development of eco- and adventure tourism. There is an affiliated zone within the park for tourism activities. Tourism business in the park is performed by local tourism companies that provide services and transportation from Yakutsk, the capital of the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic. Transportation is season dependent and is performed in the summer season using water transport such as engine-powered large-scale ships, diesel-powered light boats, passenger boats, small barges and other various types of small motorboats. During the winter period, transportation is provided by cars using the frozen surface of the Lena River.

3.3 Philosophy of Science.

The research question of this thesis was to determine any potential influences related to the Lena Pillars National Park destination image components that might affect an intention to visit or to recommend. The research question focused specifically on visitor immersion and post visitation stages as any negative influences might affect the destination's image for future potential visitors due to the previous visitors' roles as destination image formation agents.

There is a natural prerequisite for establishing a philosophical paradigm to guide research. A research paradigm is defined as a "basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990: 17) and locates the theoretical and philosophical framework of a study. As Guba emphasized, the introspective purpose of defining the proper paradigm for research is not the overall aim but rather a choice made from generally predefined directions and guidelines to lead research to its purpose and to answer the research question within a certain vector of thought (Guba, 1990).

Traditionally, there are several recognized paradigms in the scientific/philosophical field of research (Moses and Knutsen, 2014; Neuman, 2014) such as positivist/naturalist, constructivist/interpretive and critical theory. One of the founding researchers listed the paradigms as positivism, post-positivism and constructivism (Guba, 1990). Creswell (2013) noted that as the development of social philosophy continues to expand other philosophical frames have emerged such as postmodern perspectives, pragmatism, and feminist theory. However, after careful consideration, this research chose to consider the traditional set of paradigms proposed by Guba (1990). For Creswell (2013) strongly advised researchers to only utilize newer perspectives when they have competence in use of the traditional paradigms as well as previous experience.

Each of the three paradigms Guba mentioned defines different perspectives for a study, its course of actions, ontological and epistemological considerations and methods of analysis (Guba, 1990). Subsequently, it is important to distinguish the criteria that affected the paradigmatic choice for this research.

The main idea of one of the commonly used scientific approaches in social sciences - *critical theory* - is to discover the social traits of political influences and to aim towards investigating justice and deviations in legal morals (Madison, 2005). Such a focus has no correlations with the subject of this research. Due to critical theory's main objectives, this approach was considered incompatible for application in my study.

One of the most common and often applied paradigms in scientific research is ***positivism***. Positivistic approaches to research are founded on the belief of one truth existing in the world, which is yet to be discovered. This belief is naturally justified by positivism as it draws its roots from the natural sciences. The world in positivism is perceived as measurable, observable and analyzable using an empirical meta observational manner. Everything can be measured and systematized, assessed and defined, and therefore categorized (Creswell, 2013). Although, positivism was used earlier in tourism research, it has been strongly criticized for being used to frame social research due to its limitations to consider the complicated complexity of social societal interrelations and nuances that are not always able to be systematized and which require a complex approach to interpretation (Neuman, 2014).

As the concept of destination image is a multidimensional social phenomenon, it leads to an intersection of complex dimensional interrelations mentioned in the theoretical chapter: an integration of cognitive common and unique, functional and affective, holistic and attribute-based components. Thus, the conceptual attributes of such research phenomena excluded an exploitation of positivist theory in this study.

Further development and deviation of positivist theory led to the ***post-positivist*** approach that is based on the above-mentioned perception of the measurability of the existing real world. However, post-positivism is open for inclusion in analysis processes of a complex view of the social world and its complicated correlation with the real world. Yet, due to post-positivism's reliance on strict systematization and categorization (often studied using quantitative methods of research), it also was deemed not suitable for my research either. (Creswell, 2013)

Therefore, the theory of social ***constructivism*** was found to be the closest and the most suitable approach to answering the research question of my study. This was due to the concept of destination image being defined by personal imagination and interpretative in nature. But, it was mainly due to viewing this phenomenon through new visitors and observing the phenomenon through their personal perspectives. This is a main tenet of social constructivism –a multiplicity of world perceptions informed by various social roles and situations, backgrounds and environments.

Ontology is defined as the nature of reality (Guba, 1990). Using the frames of social constructivism, the world is perceived as a multiverse of every single mind within the multiplex of conditions of social existence. This raises concerns about the phenomenon of destination image having correlational connections in the *real* positivists' world of strictly measurable and systematized concepts such as marketing, business management and economical prognosis as well as coordination for tourism businesses. Therefore, the ontological stance of this research assumes a relativist world observed through the prism of social constructivism, which personifies the worldview of each respondent. Analyzing personal views of destination image using the philosophical paradigm of constructivism is critical as is distinguishing influences that can be considered negative with the purpose

that these can be defined (potentially organized and categorized) from the perspective of the real positivistic objective world of Lena Pillars Nature Park destination and its further management. Thus, by using a constructivist paradigm founded on a relativist ontological stance, I admit we all live in a common *real* physical world. However, in the matter of social life and social research, I acknowledge the diversity of images (perceptions) of the destination by respondents and attempt to apply the analysis of data received from them to the real objective world of business administration and nature park coordination.

Therefore, it is fundamental for a researcher to carefully guide the research and its gathering of information. *Epistemological stances* are defined by Guba (1990) as the relationship between the researcher and the data, knowledge and research materials. Using a constructivist frame this relationship is **subjective**. The constructivist paradigm presupposes perceptions differ from one personality to another and diversify into various perspectives, which are influenced by environments and backgrounds. Subsequently, the researcher's environment and background is also a prism to the perception of knowledge gained through research (Lincoln and Guba, 2013). However, this does not mean that the research is predicated only on the personal opinion of the researcher. Instead, it suggests the constant consideration of the subjective mind of the researcher. And therefore, calls for careful evaluation of information and engagement with data in structured and organized ways in order to embrace the ontological stance of the research. Therefore, my research required careful implementation of research methods to coordinate a social constructivist epistemological stance.

3.5 Methodology

The implementation of research methods is a pathway to achieving answers to research questions. Relatedly, the research paradigm is the basis of a study's approach. The approach to methods is mainly concerned with establishing the focus on *how, what ways and methods to use* in order to gain study results.

As my research question focused on potential negative influences that visitors might experience during visitation to the Lena Pillars Nature Park, the approach of my research aimed to deliver the results of investigating problems, traits or patterns of influence on visitor perceptions with respect to the attributes mentioned in the theory chapter.

There are several ways to approach a research question depending on the stance a researcher takes to the informing theories and processing of data.

As the matter of processing research diversifies, approaches to relationships between data and theoretical bases have differentiated. In this research, I considered Bryman's (2012) threefold classification: inductive, deductive and iterative approaches. An inductive approach predicates data collection and theory building to existing findings. A deductive approach processes data collection and analysis based on prior theoretical research. Whereas iterative types incorporate both inductive and deductive approaches dependent on research needs.

My research used an ***inductive*** method. I first focused on investigating the theoretical basis of the concept—destination image and then applied that basis during my empirical data processing. I also considered the use of approaches undertaken in previous studies of destination image.

The method of data collection and analysis I chose was a ***qualitative*** approach. This was because this approach provided the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of destination image within set frames of theory and my research paradigm. The approach also enabled me to investigate in depth and gain a close perspective of the concept, which was characterized by a high level of subjective personified reasoning.

3.6 Qualitative research approach

Qualitative approaches to scientific research aim to investigate understandings from the perspective of the informant, whereas a quantitative approach aims to track tendencies and seeks to predict and manage findings.

"Qualitative research generally aims to answer questions about the "what", "how" or "why" of a phenomenon rather than "how many" or "how much", which are answered by quantitative methods" (Bricki & Green, 2007: 2). Thus, qualitative research is suitable for research studying concepts, meaning, and understandings of social phenomena and human behavior. The emphasis of qualitative research is on the interpretation of the objective world by an individual mind (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). In the case of studying the social construct of destination image that is a product of a human mind and therefore is unsuitable for tangible evaluation, conducting research through qualitative research was the most sensible method for conducting my study.

In the frame of destination image formation, the rationality of choosing a qualitative approach is based on recommendations of Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001), Etchner and Ritchie (2003), Beerli and Martin (2004), Gartner and Tasci (2007), all of whom who identified the lack of such an approach in the existing basis of theoretical knowledge.

This type of research is focused of reflecting of personal notes and conclusions made during the process of analyzing collected data. Data collection can be made by such methods in qualitative research as interviews, and questionnaires. Interviews can include personal interviews, non-personal interviews, and group interviews. There are also different ways to record interviews: making paper notes, sound recordings as well as video recordings. After collecting, data analysis processes occur, which relies mainly on personal perception (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

In the qualitative research approach of this study, the process of data collection was performed by conducting semi-structured interviews in stage 1 the "pre-visit" and in stage 3, the "post-visit", and a field-note questionnaire in stage 2, the "immersion" stage.

As Punch (2005, p. 144) put it:

"The interview is the most prominent data collection tool in qualitative research. It is a very good way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality. It is also one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others".

As a tool of communication, interviews take various forms depending on their purpose for investigating information: "Interviewing has a wide variety of forms and a multiplicity of uses. The most common type of interviewing is individual, face-to-face verbal interchange, but it can also take the form of face-to-group interviewing, mailed or self-administered questionnaires, the telephone surveys. Interviewing can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured … It can be used for the purpose of measurement or its scope can be the understanding of an individual or a group perspective".

Creswell (1998) sees an interview as a conversation between the interviewer and interviewee, where the main goal of the interviewer is to understand, hear, and perceive experiences of the informants, to feel their emotions and to share their vision. This is one of the basic tenets of a constructivist paradigm, which sets a focus on interpretation, and in the frame of this research setting a focus to understand and interpret the received data in the relativist real world of the destination studied.

Berg and Lune (2012) and Brinkman and Kvale (2014) recommended an interview as the most applicable method in research when the aim is to understand and investigate an idea or meaningful phenomena in social constructs, or to observe informants' behavior to explore challenges and issues. Therefore, as this research aimed to investigate potential negative influences, which due to their core nature were interpreted as challenges. Subsequently, the interview method was chosen as the prominent tool for data collection.

3.7 Research design

Research designs are plans developed to manage the process of data collection, assessment and analysis based on the chosen methods mentioned previously in this chapter.

The design of my research is based on a model proposed by Punch (2005). It is divided into four subcategories:
1) Strategy
2) Framework
3) Subject and object of research
4) Objectives

Based on the aim of my research, I investigated potential negative factors influencing the intention to revisit and to recommend the destination of Lena Pillars Nature Park that appeared during visitation processes. Therefore, the strategy was to conduct interviews during the three stages of destination image formation: pre-visit, immersion and post-visit. Through the analysis of data, negative influences of the overall picture of Lena Pillars Nature Park were identified. Based on the philosophical paradigm guiding this study, qualitative research methods of data collection and analysis, two semi-structures interviews were conducted during the stages of pre-visitation and post-visitation and a field note questionnaire was used during the second stage of immersion. The location framework of the research was set by space frames of the touristic zone of Lena Pillars Nature Park (Appendix 1).

The conceptual framework focused on the stages of destination image formation processes for first-time visitors of Lena Pillars Nature Park. As Stabler (1988) stated, despite the unique perspective of every person, the destination images of several different individuals may have a lot in common despite no connection between each other due to the fact of exposure to similar circumstances, influences and factors. Thus, Stabler's perspective directly connected with the relativist ontological framing of this study and correlated with the geographical location of the Lena Pillars Nature Park.

The subjects of interviews were first-time visiting tourists to the Lena Pillars Nature Park. As the research question was set to discover potential negative influences on the intention to visit again or to recommend the destination image of Lena Pillars Nature Park, the focus of interviews was to detect challenges and flaws as well as common traits of interview informants regarding the components that form the park's overall destination image.

3.8 Sampling

Based on the aim of my research and its conceptual frame, I decided on a specific group of tourists with certain distinguishing characteristics. Therefore, my choice of sampling method was non-probability sampling that is defined as non-random selection based on pre-determined criteria. According to McCombes (2019, p. 1) "non-probability sampling techniques are often used in exploratory and qualitative research. In these researches the aim is to develop an initial understanding of a small or under-researched population" which in the case of my research was first-time visitors to the park who had not been investigated using the frame of the concept—destination image prior to this study.

Interviews were conducted to investigate the destination image of Lena Pillars Nature Park. Informants were found using the criteria of visiting Lena Pillars through organized tours for the first time and pre-ordering of touristic services at two touristic agencies operating in Yakutsk, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).

The selection criteria were developed using the destination image formation stages for first-time visitors, these stages were mentioned by Jenkins (1999). The biggest difference of a pre-visit and post-visit image is observed on first-time visitors. Subsequently, these visitors provide the clearest track of evidence regarding the destination image modification process. In the early 2000s, Beerli and Martin (2004) commented that by elaborating on the process of information storing and its interrelation in minds, can lead to confusion for a tourist when attempting to distinguish the types and sources of information connected to a destination. Thus, the selection of informants was focused on first-time visitor.

3.9 Data collection

As there were three interviews conducted across three stages, the types of interviews varied according to the stage. Ten informants were interviewed.

The first interview was conducted after tourists arrived in Yakutsk. In this interview, the objective was to define the induced image of the destination image formation stage as described by Gunn (1972). To reiterate, the induced image is the image influenced by marketing information and the first interview served to explore informants' knowledge regarding their visit to Lena Pillars Nature Park. This interview was semi-structured consisting of a set of questions aimed to define the influences that formed the image of the destination up to the first interview point in time. Key questions guided interviewees through the process, and generated a comfortable space to establish contact as well as created a relaxing and trusting atmosphere (Gill et al. 2008).

At this stage, each informant was given a code to ensure the anonymity of their identity when filling out the questionnaire, the next step in the information collection process and for the third and last interview (see Appendix Y).

The second stage of my research involved research participants in filling out an open answer questionnaire at the end of their park visitation. It was important to fill out the questionnaire while the informants were still within the location of the nature park. This was done to obtain the most relevant and fresh information regarding factors that seemed important while visitors were still emerged in the experience to compare it to the later assessed and processed state of the image the informants would accumulate after leaving the nature park premises. The first two questions were aimed to elicit reflection regarding their experiences. The last two questions were the primary aim of the questionnaire, which was to detect possible negative factors that influence park experiences and affect the overall image of the park (see Appendix YY).

The third stage of interviews occurred on the last day of every informant's departure from Yakutsk. There were several days of break from the date of their visitation to Lena Pillars

Nature Park. Although this varied between tourists. The semi-structured form of interviews was chosen as the most convenient method for sharing visitors' personal perspectives and to be open to information that could not have been taken into consideration earlier in the data collection stage. This set of interviews included general guiding questions and conversation marker points (refer to Appendix YYY).

The language of interviews varied between informants: interviews with federal tourists were conducted in the Russian language as only one of the informants spoke English, yet his knowledge of the language was basic and therefore the interview was held in Russian in order to avoid challenges arising from language barriers. The interviews with international tourists were conducted in Russian and English. Two out of seven informants came from countries of the former Soviet Union, and therefore spoke Russian fluently. Interviews with the other five informants were conducted in English. The average time for each interview was 30 minutes. The total time for the two stages of personal interviews with each informant constituted 10 hours.

3.10 Liability and validity

To achieve reliable results, a set of measures was undertaken such as inclusive sampling of informants, which makes the findings valid for a regular visitor to a destination.

One of the main conditions of validity of the data collected through semi-structured interviews and open-end questionnaires was the unawareness of informants regarding the research question. As Creswell (2009) noted, awareness of a sampling group of research agendas may affect their perspectives of a situation. subsequently, for my research, the informants were not informed of research question and participated in the research without knowing the framework of the study concept. To sustain this lack of awareness, interview guides for the semi-structured interviews and the open-end questions for the questionnaire were designed with the objective of not revealing the researcher's interest particularly with respect to negative factors affecting overall destination image.

3.11 Limitations

One of the major limitations in my study was the scarcity of time resources. As all the interviews were held in the summer of 2020. And, as previously mentioned, in qualitative research, the processes of data collection and analysis are closely connected. The number of consecutive interviews and their analysis were conducted within a tight schedule.

The process of data collecting and analyzing was immensely affected by the global pandemic of COVID-19. The circumstances of unpredictable touristic schedules and foremost the danger for all of the participants in the research were a major concern. Yet, due to the legal regulations within the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the nature park remained open to visitors in late June 2020.

As some of interviews were conducted in Russian language, in the process of writing and documenting the information in each informant´s coded and anonymized profile, I translated all the information. As a graduated translator with a five-year degree and experience in translating academic papers at the Research Laboratory of Northern Eastern Federal University for publications in science editions, I am confident in the reliability of the translated material. However, research should always consider the limitation of cultural exchange and intercultural communication when investigating individual and subjective phenomena, therefore this aspect should be in included as a limitation in this research.

The characteristics of residence, age, education etc. of the tourists were not included in sampling selection criteria. These were deemed unnecessary as my research aimed to discover negative influences on the destination's overall picture during the destination image formation process. And the results will be recommended as a tool for local companies to use to promote to a general audience without any target segmentation promoting strategy. Subsequently, the decision was to not include the aforementioned sampling criteria.

However, those criteria characteristics suggest further research agendas. Importantly, socio cultural codes, national background, exposure to different sets of mass media and education systems have a massive influence on the organic stage of the destination image and therefore require deeper investigation in order to apply successful market segmentation as well as implementation of well-adjusted specific market marketing strategies.

3.12 Ethical considerations

In this research, during data collecting process, all information and any personal data relating to informants were held anonymously. Further, due to data protection legal obligations directed by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), every single interview was decoded and recorded only in written form with no tracks available to lead to the identities of the informants. Every single informant was informed about anonymity. Such anonymity accords with circumstances of no accountability, which according to Punch (2005) leads to the establishment of better trust and connections between interviewer and informant.

Data collected throughout the various stages of interviews was kept completely private and protected from unauthorized access. Similarly, all written field notes and digitalized transcripts were kept in my personal computer protected by password. Field notes that were requested for completion by informants were distributed by a travel agency employee in non-transparent folders and protected by anonymizing informants with interview code numbers that were given to informants at the first interview. This ensured the agency employee was unaware of the identity of the person filling in the form. All filled questionnaires were scanned and sent to me by e-mail, the originals were shredded and destroyed.

The reliability of information was another aspect requiring ethical consideration. It was my direct responsibility as a researcher to conduct this study in as bias free, objective, and in a confidential manner to ensure the reliability of results. As I chose a qualitative method of research that implies a subjective creative approach to analysis, it was a vital

condition of my personal attitude and focus to keep in line with the guidelines for any researcher being open-minded and maintaining a distanced observant position.

The biggest ethical concern within this study was the consideration of acceptability of the research in the circumstances of a global pandemic. The decision to conduct the study relying on the help and support from travel agencies while personally being distanced from the data collection approach was a subject of major consideration for me. However, after the discussion of the mentioned ethical concerns with the employees of the tourism sector, I was assured of the security policy that would be applied for the safety of all tourism experience participants, and therefore I made the decision to conduct the study.

3.13 Data analysis

The specifics of data collection and analysis in qualitative research represents a symbiotic relationship, where the process of data analysis is inseparable from data collection procedures (Creswell, 2009). While the process of data collection varied, the process of analysis of already collected data was ongoing. Subsequently, the whole process involved simultaneous collection and analysis.

In setting up measurable stages to navigate this study, I exploited the following basic qualitative analysis structure: 1) collecting/transcribing data in the form of written field notes 3) organizing the written records into a personal and easy retrievable system; 4) familiarization with data 5) coding 6) categorizing the codes into themes (Lacey & Luff, 2007).

Due to the creative nature associated with the individual patterns of thinking of a particular researcher conducting a study, qualitative research tended to vary with respect to the processes of collecting and analyzing data (which as mentioned above are interrelated). Therefore, it is essential to understand the research framework and maintain a clear focus on the research question in order to analyze the ongoing flow of data starting from the process of its collection (Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018).

As I had already defined in the research question, the framework of my study focused on the factors that might lead to negative perceptions of Lena Pillars Nature Park's destination image, I found framework analysis to be most suitable for my coding processes.

The decoding and categorizing process of data analysis in qualitative research consists of several stages and requires the researcher to sustain a consistent and organized strategy in order to achieve adequate findings and reliable results.

As this study consisted of several stages of interviews, the process of conducting the interviews, the process of assessing, coding, categorizing and *analyzing* the data was ongoing starting from the first interview with the first informant.

As the estimated length of each interview with each informant was planned to be within 30 minutes, I contacted informants prior to their arrival and described the preliminary plan for the interview process. For the first interview, informants were requested to dedicate half an hour of their time in a comfortable setting of their own choosing. For the second stage of data collection, informants were requested to fill out open-end questionnaires during their visit to the Lena Pillars Nature Park. I estimated 10 minutes was required to fill out the form. In the third stage of interviews, informants agreed to participate in a 30 minute interview after their visitation, and before they left Yakutia.

In an ideal scenario of research, the transcribing process of all interviews would have taken an enormous amount of time and the effort of several people dedicating their time specifically to transcribing the records. The estimated time ratio of transcription is 6:1, six hours of transcription to one hour of interview (Hancock et al, 2009). As I had several stages of interviews for efficiency, I decided to write down the interviews in the process of conducting them as well as documenting relevant information immediately after the interview.

The specifics of content analysis were suitable for the conduct of interviews where informants chose their own interview setting. There was no requirement for a special space for interviews. As my focus was on the content, meaning and message of their

responses, I skipped behavioral observations during interviews. However, to be able to transcribe interviews in the process of conducting the same, and to be able to write down everything that I found valuable and relevant for the study immediately after the interview, the circumstances of the interview required a quiet place with minimum background noise and stable internet connection.

To collect as much detailed data as possible in written form during my interviews, I used a background noise absorbing microphone so the interviewees did not hear the noise of my keyboard typing while I was taking notes of their answers. As I had experience and felt confident in blind typing, it was possible to keep suitable comfortable eye contact in order to establish a trustful atmosphere. Eye contact plays an important role in receiving trustworthy information from informants who tend to open up more and give more detailed and honest answers if there is a personal contact with the interviewer (Punch 2005, Berg and Lune, 2012). Four out of 10 interviews were conducted by video call, while six interviews were conducted by audio call.

As the first interviews were conducted consecutively one day after another, I spent my time dedicated to familiarizing myself with the data and starting the first stage of coding. To separate the interviews and prevent the possibility of mixing data in my mind, I systematized the interviews under codes from #2 to #11. I purposefully skipped #1 as this number created concerns of an informant feeling intimidated by being the first person interviewed. According to Punch (2005), informants find it the more comfortable in situations that seem a part of usual experience, even if the experience is not particularly their own.

As the purpose of the first interview was to detect the induced image stage by Gunn´s destination image formation model, I asked them questions regarding the influences from their personal network, mass media and marketing sources. As mentioned above, I used framework analysis focusing on influences that might possibly create a negative perception of Lena Pillars, my purpose was to identify the current state of the image they held of the destination prior to the actual experience of visitation.

The group of codes that emerged during analysis of the first stage of interviews (see Appendix Y) were indexed with markers such as "TV channels"; "YouTube travel channel"; "friends"; "family", "travel agency"; and "website context advertisement". These were connected to the category of "Information sources forming induced image".

Codes	Extracts from the interviews
TV channels	"... on weekends we watch federal channel ... it helps (the purpose of the show) to explore our country" "I usually just leave the TV going on Sundays and watch in the background evening travel show" "We don't watch series ... prefer something light, so watch traveling (if there is a time)"
YouTube travel channel	"I am subscribed to YouTube blogs about nature travel, food travels, extreme sport travel" "I like YouTube videos that show places that people usually don't go to, like exotic travel videos"
Friends	"My friends' parents lived here; they said its worth visiting" "My friends visited this place as exchange students, they showed me the pictures...it´s a "must visit""
Family	"My father used to work here (in Yakutia), visited Lena Pillars as a part of a work trip" "My cousin lives in the province up the North, he said I should visit ... one of things that is easy to go to here"
Travel agency	"... travel agency suggested to include the nature park after we purchased the lighter package" "... company (travel agency) included the tour in a package"
Website ad	"I saw the ad on tripadvisor" "... showed up as a context ad on booking"

Codes "Existing information"; "Lena Pillars components" and "Lena Pillars motivation" were collected under the category of "Expectations components"

Codes	Exacts from interviews
Lena Pillars existing information	"I read a bit in the brochure … stone towers, right? Looked nice." "It´s a nature park with beautiful rocks, there is also a nice view over the river, I saw in pictures". "It's a stone monolith, with some weird forms, like stalagmites. Old ones"
Lena pillars expectations	"… there is also a nice view in the river, I saw in pictures, must be cool" "I hope to have enough time to make good photos. I hope it is going to be an easy route, I am not a pro hiker"
Lena pillars motivation	"My parents lived here, I heard their stories, they advised me to travel here" "My cousin lives in the northern province, I visited him and decided to travel to Lena Pillars, they are quite well known here. He said it is worth it, and I don't know if I will ever return to Yakutia, so it is a nice chance to see it now".

By the time of open coding the first interviews, I had conducted interviews #4-#7 consecutively within two weeks and had spent the time between interviews organizing and familiarizing myself with my written records and detecting codes already existing in my list.

By the time I have conducted interviews #7-#11, the first #2-#4 interviewees had filled out the questionnaire, and I added their written field notes from the questionnaires to their profiles under interviews numbers.

During the process of coding the data obtained in written form filled out by informants themselves (Appendix YY), the valuable information for me was focused on detecting influences that affect the perception of the overall picture in negative, discomforting or displeasing ways. Subsequently, I had to consider the components within the paradigms of comfort/discomfort; pleasure/displeasure; satisfaction/dissatisfaction; and

positive/negative (in common perspective). Next, I took each of the previously identified codes and considered and reflected on whether the codes might be perceived as belonging to the mentioned paradigms.

The last stage of semi-structured interviews was of major importance to identify the influence of actual visitation on the overall image. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was led by the key questions presented in Appendix YYY.
After collecting all the interviews notes, I took time to familiarize myself with the obtained data in several ways:

- Each informant's data was organized under each informants' anonymized recognition code. I familiarized myself with each's data to gain a better perception of each informant to gain a better understanding of each informant´s perception as they moved through several stages of destination image formation.
- I approached my familiarization with collected data by organizing it into three parts with each part containing field notes from interview stages with no connection to the informant's anonymized code. The purpose of this was to evaluate the prior identified codes in order to categorize the codes under similar themes at different stages of destination image formation.

Throughout the process of familiarizing with each informant's full data profile, I used a deductive coding method i.e., a concept-driven method that allowed me to analyze the text with a clear understanding of the study´s objectives and limits. This was chosen as the most suitable for framework analysis due to its possibility of narrowing the indexing process to a predefined set of codes driven by a dedicated framework (Lune & Berg, 2012; Boije, 2010).

Upon processing coded data by stage of interview, I started connecting existing sets of codes into predefined categorized sections. The categories were predefined to answer the research question and in further analysis to explore the three stages of destination image formation in Gunn´s model.

In the first stage of interviews the objective was to define the state of induced image and explore the vision, motivation and expectation of informants from their visitation to Lena Pillars Nature Park. Thus, the predefined themed subcategories used were "promotional information"; "educational information", "personal network influence" and "expectations".

In the process of analyzing open-end questionnaires, all the answers were rewritten and digitalized and later were coded using an open coding method. This was done in order to obtain a full picture of an informant´s reaction to the experience and to be open to unexpected factors of influence. As the first stage of open coding was completed, the list of emergent codes was analyzed regarding their relevance within the predefined frame and their service to the paradigm of positive/negative influence. Consequently, this aimed to discover factors affecting the satisfaction/dissatisfaction paradigm.

In order to achieve a full understanding and to interpret data from the open-ended questionnaires, informants were asked in the beginning of the third interview to clarify some elements in their answers (handwriting, interpretation of some word or expression).

At the second stage of categorizing, the existing set of codes that emerged from the open-ended questionnaires completed during informants' experience immersion generated the following theme categories: "satisfactory moments", "things to improve", and "unsatisfactory moments".

Chapter 4. Findings

Based on the framework analysis of data collected through the three stages of interviews: 1) semi-structured interviews 2) open-ended questionnaires and 3) semi-structured interviews with 10 informants, who were first-time visitors to Lena Pillars Nature Park, I defined two emergent thematic categories: pre-visitation image of Lena Pillars and post-visitation image of Lena Pillars. Each category was subcategorized into the components of media influence, marketing influence, and personal network influence.

4.1 Pre-visitation image of Lena Pillars at the first interview stage

The category of pre-visitation image was explored through the codes that emerged after analyzing primarily the first stage of interviews and through comparisons mentioned by several informants at the third stage of interviews based on the "expectation-reality" paradigm.

4.1.1 Media influence

The first stage of the interviewing process consisted of several opening questions that were aimed to comfort and invite informants to participate in a conversation (see Appendix Y). The following questions focused on media sources. The responses of interviewees regarding their media sources revealed the majority were inclined to access internet video channels, dedicated to travels.

"I don't watch TV, I don't even have cable connection, so (I watch) only YouTube. I have a few channels I am subscribed for, and sometimes I just check something when browsing and searching during my free time". (Informant #2)

It was clear informants #2, #4, #5 and #7's attitude towards TV was unsupportive and that they preferred not to be perceived as TV watchers.

"We don't watch TV in our family, I don't let it (to turn it on). We only search information on the Internet, I don't like it with trash. What trash? Well, advertisements and all this political… No, I only watch travel and hobbies, yes". (Informant #4)

"I only watch YouTube. I haven't watched TV probably for 8-10 years, and am not planning to ever do again, keeping away from that". (Informant #5)

Five informants (#2, #3, #7, #10, and #11) had heard of Lena Pillars from the well-known Russian blogger Varlamov (https://youtu.be/iIJePvoNiCs) who visited Lena Pillars in the winter time and made a series of promotional videos. The five informants had been impressed by views of the wide frozen river (Lena River). Yet, they had decided to visit during summertime as flight tickets were cheaper in summertime. Further, the informants found it more comfortable to engage in physical activities in the warm season.

"What channels? You mean TV? I don't watch TV! No, never. I don't even have subscription, never did! Oh, internet channels too? Well, I listen to podcasts, and follow several personal blogs about extreme travels, and I follow the YouTube channel of Varlamov". (Informant #7)

This obvious resentment of television was observed within the federal tourists, and as a researcher with knowledge of the political situation in the country of origin of these informants, I suggest the correlation of such attitudes related to their political views and positioning. As these factors were not considered within the framework of my research, the reasoning of their choices is not relevant for this study. Therefore, the valuable findings in this category were the clear preferences of informants towards internet sources.

4.1.2 Marketing influence

One of the major image forming influences on the pre-visit destination image of Lena Pillars Nature Park were promotions and marketing materials. Informants were exposed to these from different channels: tourism agency website, and printed brochures received after showing interest in visiting the destination of Yakutia.

"To be honest, I did not know of Lena (Pillars) park before they offered to include it in the package of the tour. I checked the link they (travel agency) sent to me, and it seemed nice enough". (Informant #4)

All informants with the exception of informants #6 and #8 admitted that the most informative knowledge they received about the Lena Pillars Nature Park came from the travel agencies and through promotion materials.

Informants #6 and #8 expressed a personal interest in Arctic nature tourism, as they listed other Arctic nature destinations well known in the federal tourism industry: Karelia River rafting, Kamchatka camping, Khibiny alpine resort in Murmansk area and Manpupuner rock formations in the Komi republic.

The information that the informants received from the travel agencies contained pictures, and basic information about the natural resources and archeological importance of the area.

4.1.3 Personal network

Some informants had heard of Lena Pillars from their friends, family or people they met during their previous travels.

"My parents used to work here when it still was the USSR. They were archeologists, so they told me a lot about Yakutia, I always wanted to visit. They described the weather here as insane, I wanted to try in the wintertime, but decided it is probably more enjoyable in the summertime. They recommended that I come to visit Lena Pillars, they have been here, we have pictures in a family photo album, so Lena Pillars always has been a must- go place". (Informant #9)

Informants #6 and #8, who as was mentioned earlier have had wide experiences of travelling to Arctic destinations, acknowledged the advice to visit was provided by a fellow traveler:

"People we met during rafting in Karelia, a couple from Kazan (capital of Tatarstan republic) kept recommending us to visit Lena Pillars if we wanted some ideas for our next travel experience. They also said that Lena was worth looking at, but not really good for rafting – too wide, but the rocks are fascinating. Then, we met people at Manpupuner, and the local guide told us about the GULAG history in the Komi area. The guide mentioned that in Yakutia they also have a history of concentration camps and rock formations too! (laughs). So, we started thinking of coming here, not because of concentration camps, (laughs) but because if it keeps coming up, yeah, it may be really worth coming and seeing, why not?" (Informant #6)

One informant had a relative living in Yakutia in northern province who recommended him to visit Lena Pillars.

"There is of course a lot to look at and visit in Yakutia, but the tourism is very poorly developed, so it is very expensive or difficult to find ways. My cousin said if I want to look around and see something nice, Lena Pillars probably is the first place to go to, but since there are no regular routes on boats here, I bought a tour through a travel agency". (Informant #4)

Each of informants had an organic image, an image created by the natural information environment of media and personal networks, of the destination image reinforced by promotional information from the travel agencies. All of these naturally created an expectation for each informant regarding their experience of the destination.

4.1.4 Expectations

It was important to distinguish the state of the destination image during interviews as well as informants' expectations about visiting Lena Pillars Nature Park. Informants were led to describe what they would be doing during their visit to Lena Pillars Nature Park. While they had been informed by a travel agency, did informants have personal ideas of what they expected to do, see, and experience based on what the travel agency promised to deliver.

Informant were asked to provide in simple form their expectations, and to describe what they expected to experience at the nature park.

The expectations of each informant included a view from the top point of Lena Pillars, a walking tour in a nature park and cultural experiences of a Yakut national fire service ceremony.

"It of course will be nice, I have seen the pictures, they said there is going to be a sacred fire ceremony, that I guess, will be fantastic! And I hope to take some good pictures from the top view, I have a nice wide-angle lens camera with me, so I hope I get to make some worthy shots". (Informant #5).

"I hope I can make it to the top of the mountain, slowly maybe. It would be quite sad to come so far and not to get up (to the top)". (Informant #2)

"I did not quite read what exactly was in the description of the tour, should read probably the day before visiting. I mean, I guess we don't have to take food with us, right? Do you know? Anyway, since it rocks and mountain, I brought my outdoor shoes with me, and I guess there is going to be lots of mosquitos, so I probably should buy some spray." (Informant #11)

Based on the analysis of all the interviews, the expectation of each informant mainly focused on time management, packing necessary equipment (clothes, extra shoes, photo and video cameras, power banks, hammock) and supplies (creams, sprays, snacks, medicine) and guidance in the matter of reaching the top of the mountain except for two informants who decided not to go to the top due to health issues.

"My knees are hurt, so I simply will not be able to go up the hill. It is ok for me just to watch, I have contacted the agency and they promised that there is a good enough view from the riverbank, so it sure will be great. I just hope the weather will be nice, so I can wait for the group and enjoy a small walk by the river". (Informant #4).

By defining the expectations of visitors to the park, it was possible to set a base concept development: "destination image promise –> formation of expectations –> experience immersion –> experience reflection –> formation of overall destination image".

According to the results of interviews, it was possible to explore this stage of destination image of Lena Pillars and informants' expectations regarding their prospective visitation of the location, which mainly consisted of information provided by the travel agencies.

4.2 Ongoing experience

Questions in the fill-out form were answered during visitation to the nature park in order to detect the most noticeable features and factors affecting the image of Lena Pillars for the visitors.

Informant impressions of the nature park resulted in varied interpretations by informants, who answered by creating a ratio system to express their emotional states.

Informants #2, #4, #6, #8 and #9 provided short answers using intuitevely a ratio system: "1-10, 7" (Informant #2); "9 out of 10" (Informant #4) etc. As the ratio was not given initially, it was an unexpected observation seeing the informant taking an initiative to create a ratio that has evaluated their responses and allowed to evaluate more of the overall satisfaction about the visiting process rather than putting it into well-defined and described feedback. This moment will be further discussed in the next chapter as it mights have a lead to the attributes of the destinations image formation agents.

4.2.1 Satisfactory moments

When requested to define the best feature of the nature park, apart from obvious answers mentioning the rock formations, several informants named the informational guidance from the travel agency. Tourists were given a short informational lecture about the ecological, archeological and cultural value of the park upon their arrival. Several informants expressed their content with the background information provided. Specifically, they mentioned their satisfaction with the cultural part of the lecture, where

a guide had told a tale about a family of five: parents, two sons and a daughter who all turned into stones and now watch over the river spirits.

"Very good story about family!" (Informant #2)

"I loved the fairytale" (Informant #4)

"Story is the best, more stories" (Informant #5)

"Cool story" (Informant #9)

"I liked the story, very romantic, makes this place more magic" (Informant #11)

4.2.2 Unsatisfactory moments

The main purpose of the questionnaire was to detect factors that negatively affected the overall image and to identify those factors in the process of experience immersion. This was achieved with the last two questions: Was there any inconvenience or moment of discomfort during your experience? Are there any suggestions for the improvement?

All informants identified the main inconvenience in the park was mosquitos and the limited effect of mosquito sprays. It was an obvious frustration and irritation, and several informants used inappropriate language to describe the situation.

Various other things were discomforting. Several informants mentioned the weather as the least enjoyable part of their day since it was raining and there were no facilities or roofed building to provide shelter for tourists. The only possibility to hide from the rain was to return to the boat.

Responses that were particularly interesting involved the discussion of the cultural component of the experience. As the tourists returned from the top of the mountain (they were informed of the approximate duration of time it takes to the top and back, and the time the cultural entertainment experience starts). They were invited to gather around the bonfire and were given warm drinks and snacks (due to COVID´19 regulations, there were separate bonfires to ensure tourists keep the recommended distance apart). Then, *algischit* (the Blessing speaker) performed a ceremony for the spirits of fire to bless the visitors and share *kumis* (horse milk drink). Yet, due to COVID´19 restrictions, drinks were

served in sealed single use plastic cups for each visitor. This moment disturbed several tourists (#4, #6, #8), they described it as:

"Too weird" (Informant #6)
"Felt weird with the milk, maybe it went bad?" (Informant #6)
"Not enough space around fire, and very fast ceremony, I didn't understand anything. Didn't like the milk" (Informant #8)

4.2.3 Things to improve

Suggestions for improvement were directed towards building a café or tented area, so there would be a possibility to stay on the land in comfort. There was also a suggestion to increase the cultural perspective of the experience and to spend more time with slow activities involving telling national tales, sitting around fire, and trying national cuisine.

"You should offer more food on the land, may be BBQ?" (Informant #2)

"Café, some place to have a cup of coffee or tea and relax" (Informant #4)

Thus, the on-place experience stage definitely generated strong reactions from the visitors. It was important for me as a researcher to organize the field notes before the next stage of interviews in order to clarify some of the answers provided in the questionnaires.

4.3 Post-travel image evaluation

According to Gunn´s stages of destination image formation (introduced in Chapter 1), the post visitation image is formed after returning from the visited location and during the process of reflection regarding whether the experience met their expectations and was satisfactory. Or if it was the opposite or different from the pre-visit image and therefore not satisfactory.

The findings of the post-travel image evaluation were determined after the completion of the last interview. The findings were separated into categories, dividing the overall impression into several components of the destination image.

4.3.1 Transportation

All informants expressed their regret regarding the transportation situation. Travel agencies had strict time schedules for departure to and from Lena Pillars and therefore the duration of visitation was strictly framed to the time provided by the agencies without any other possibility to find other transport.

"I wanted maybe to stay longer at the park, to walk around because it is a nature park, if it is a park then it is ok to take a walk in it, right? But everything was very packaged, we came, we went up, we went down, a bit of time on the bank and oops we have to go, the boat will be departing soon. I mean, I asked if there is another boat maybe coming later, but it was not an option, they didn't know. Apparently, they don't have communication with other transport and no scheduled routes, so that was a pity." (#Informant #6)

The majority of other answers relating to the transport situation were concerned with the limited amount of companies providing fares and tours.

However, when asked about the quality of the transportation, all the informants answered positively. They also acknowledged the good quality of service as well as the hospitality of the staff as top points in the visit.

4.3.2 Guiding

This category emerged after the analysis of the second stage of interviews, when the open-ended questionnaire was completed by informants during their visit to Lena Pillars Nature Park.

According to all the informants, two of the most impressive components of the whole experience were guiding information and cultural entertainment performed by guides.

The guiding work started from the moment tourists gathered at the river port. On the boat, guides introduced tourists to the plan for the day and held a short educational lecture about the archeological, historical, cultural and landscape value of the nature park. Upon arrival at the location, guides explained and mapped the route to the top of the touristic side of the rock formations. Some of the guides led groups to the top. A few guides stayed by the riverbank with people who were not hiking up as well as met tourists who returned quickly. When all the tourists returned from the hike, the guides performed the cultural national story telling performance ending with a fire blessing ceremony, and later helped the tourists to return to the boat.

Each informant mentioned communication with the guides as one of the core positive moments, and named the story telling experience as the most memorable part.

"I liked this tale about the Guardians family, it now feels different. The rocks do have human figure lines, and there is something very romantic in thinking about all these things as spirits and guardians, and the gods and magic. Yakut people have a very interesting religion, I have heard about shamanism, but I didn't know about the whole distinguished pantheon of gods before. This is all very exciting! And the place feels different, after all the tales about spirits, it even feels like we are somewhere in a church, or I mean, in a cathedral, an open-air cathedral". (Informant #11)

"It was nice to have guides even though it was not really necessary for the experience, since there is only one route to the top and it is hard to get lost. But it was very nice to talk to them, they told us a lot about the local culture and about the importance of the place for Yakut people. If they didn't tell us all of these things, I guess that would be like climbing any mountain, I have been in canyons in Utah, USA. It is quite alike, the stones are the stones, the climate is different for sure (laughs). There definitely were less mosquitos in the States, but yeah, the local stories are beautiful, a very kind story. And good, nice guides, good job, tell them that". (Informant #8)

4.3.3 Landscape

For the informants, the core value of the touristic area in the Lena Pillars Nature Park were the rock formations, towers of wind formed stones, the landscape and view. These were identified as the most impressive and valuable part of the visitation experience.

The road to the top of the mountain takes approximately two to four hours for a regular tourist without prior extensive hiking experience.

Each informant mentioned that the route was "not too hard", "better (easier) than I expected", "easy", "very comfortable", "easy to navigate", and "picturesque".

As noted previously, there were some environmental circumstances associated with the location that affected tourists in quite an impressive way – mosquitos, which are included in the landscape as they are a part of the geographical component.

"Mosquitos… to be honest, that was horrible. I, of course, had mosquito spray with me, but it was so many mosquitos they just didn't care, and it was going in my eyes, in my mouth, and it really got on my nerve. It was better on the top, because of the wind, but the route area that goes through the forest… Is it always like that here? How do locals live? I mean, it is horrific. I thought I am going to drive crazy. We indeed were warned that there will be mosquitos, but I have to admit, I have underestimated the power of taiga*". (Informant #7)

"Well, the thing that really shocked me is the mosquito part, particularly the amount of it. I mean, we did travel a lot around here and there in the north, and I know that in the summertime it is quite normal to have midges. But this was something else. The repellent helped a bit, but it was hard when it goes in your eyes. So yeah, I don't know, of course it is a part of the location and geography, but still. VERY annoying (laughs)". (Informant #4)

"Is there anything to do with the mosquitos? I heard sometimes it is possible to get rid of them in some specific areas, you just spray it over the area in the air… no? oh! Probably not! It is a national nature park, restricted area, sure, sure. I mean, maybe the touristic

part because you know, it was crazy. I had all my body covered and still had many bites when I arrived back at the hotel, they bit through the clothes!" (Informant #9)

This subcategory of the mosquito problem in the landscape category was noted as eliciting the most emotional responses from informants. The reaction of informants drastically varied from the highly positive impression of the rock formations landscape to great irritation and discomfort with the insect problem. This emotional response to the obvious unpleasant moment was found to be an important part that might have a great effect on the overall picture of the destination as it is an inseparable component of the functional characteristics of the place.

4.3.4 Atmosphere

The atmosphere category was mentioned by informants with respect to the cultural component of the experience and as a place of spiritual and historic importance for the Yakut people.

Informants acknowledged that they had been informed of locals' thinking regarding the Lena Pillars close connection with the world of the spirits. This information affected the perception of several informants in a condescending way. Some mentioned it felt exotic and exciting to be at the location that locals believe to be special and connected to the spiritual realm. Yet for others, it felt somewhat intimidating and made them feel concerned whether it was appropriate and respectful to the local culture and population.

"It is very exciting to walk around and think about what we heard, about the spirits and ghosts. It adds a bit of atmosphere, makes the rocks look more mysterious". (Informant #3)

"The mood is very special here, the aura of the place. If Yakut people believed that this place is a home for wandering spirits, I can understand why they could think so". (Informant #5)

"From a tourism point of view, I see how this place is very attractive for its local cultural value. But I am a bit concerned whether it is supported by the local population. Do you know? I mean, that would be a pity to build a business on something that should be protected by the local religion, like some places in Tibet, you know?" (Informant #11)

4.3.5 Infrastructure facilities

This subcategory of infrastructure facilities was noted by several informants. It has also been disucssed in relation to questionnaire completion during visitation to the Lena Pillars Nature Park.

The area dedicated for tourism activities at Lena Pillars Nature Park includes the part of the Lena River bank, routes inside the land and part of rock formations (see Appendix XX). However, even within the dedicated area inland, there are warning markers and reminders telling visitors not to cross or wander beyond that designated area for the safety of the tourists.

"It is weird that nobody hasn't built anything there yet. I mean, there were tourists, and I have seen several boats, I guess it is quite a common touristic place here in Yakutia. Why is it empty? It could have been so much better with a café to relax in after the hike. It seems like a logical business solution, isn't it?" (Informant #2)

"I was very surprised to see an absolutely empty wild nature area. To be honest, I expected it to be simple and not habited, but it is completely wild, if you do not consider the tourists' route marks. I understand that it is the prohibited area of a nature preservation, but I mean, they bring tourists there already, right? Local government should have given some special permission to build something for tourists there, at least one building. It is a tourist spot, if they let us be there, why not provide quality service? I mean, I liked it anyway, but it could have been better if there was a place to hide from the rain". (Informant #8)

Due to the specific location and legal regulations, at the current moment, the area cannot provide any buildings, infrastructural facilities or commonly provided touristic services such as cafes, restaurants, and souvenir shops.

"I talked to the guides about it (legal regulations), and it of course makes sense with the nature preservation program. Yet, as a tourist, I am confused about the lack of facilities and pursuits to deliver touristic services. I work with tourists at home, and currently here it seems to be a waste of an opportunity to provide great quality nature tourism. Everything is great, it just needs a bit of work". (Informant #11)

4.3.6 Satisfaction

The satisfaction category was created from the codes that emerged in answers regarding further recommendations and possible inconveniences that were apparent during park visitation. Seven out of 10 informants answered positively regarding further recommendations.

"Well, I think it is one of the unique places to visit. Considering that it is in our country, I think it is very important to travel within the country and support local tourism. Why travel to Utah when we have our own stones, right? So, I will definitely recommend it.

An inconvenient moment was of course the mosquitos and the fact that there was nowhere to hide from rain, but I mean... It´s still ok. I knew that I was coming to Yakutia and the nature here is wild, so even though however surprising, it is natural. Personally, I felt sadder about the house, I mean, that there was no house or building at all, but we survived, so it was a good trip. But I don't think that I would come for a second time. I would rather visit some new place." (Informant #8)

"I will definitely recommend visiting to everyone I know, in fact, I have already posted it on my Instagram account that this is absolutely one of the places one has to visit. I always try to find to travel somewhere with history, with some vibe, you know? It is just boring to walk around in the city, cities all are kind of the same. Buildings, shopping, food might be different, but I live in a very big city, I guess I can find food from all over the worlds delivered to my home door (laughs). So, I'm definitely recommending it, I might even send my friends here next summer.

Something unpleasant? Well, definitely mosquitos! But now it even feels like part of that place´s aura, you know? Like, you know the story about the guardians keeping watch over the Lena river. So, it kind of even felt like they try to scare us away by sending mosquitos. Might be true, you cannot know about those things.

I would probably return if I had won a lottery (laughs). It is quite expensive to travel here, so I would like to return, maybe with my friends, to make a proper photoshoot, but I don't think that it makes sense to spend so much money on travelling to the same place when there are so many other new places to explore. It is expensive, so no, because of money, no." (Informant #5)

Chapter 5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the theoretical concepts introduced in chapter 2, specifically, the theoretical background of the phenomena of destination image formation. The chapter applies this background to findings explored during interviews and which were presented in the previous chapter.

The first stage of interviews conducted in this study aimed to discover pre-images Lena Pillars Nature Park as well as to determine the influences that affected the pre-images the most.

As Govers (2005) stated, the importance of the pre-visit image is crucial for a successful experience both for provider and tourist. His statement is supported by Beerli and Martin (2004) who insisted that post-visit image and satisfaction have direct correlation to the promise created by induced image, one of the stages of the development of the pre-visit image.

Thus, it was important to explore the pre-image that informants held before their experience of the study location. Doing this enabled the development of a clear vision of their motivation and expectation.

As presented in the previous chapter, the informants already had an understanding and knowledge of the destination. It was important to detect and explore the state of the image as well as the influences that formed it. Pizam and Mansfeld (1999) addressed the importance of the organic image, which is formed by non-intentional information absorption, and is characterized by some stereotypes and common beliefs. Organic images are difficult to change once formed. Therefore, the images that the informants shaped from the descriptions provided by their friends, family and passive information absorption served to form the basis of their Lena Pillars image.

The opposite of an organic image is an induced image. An induced image is created by intentional information search and reflection, and is more amenable to reshaping.

Based on analysis of first interview data, the state of the organic destination image of Lena Pillars Nature Park varied amongst informants. Three informants generated their organic image via TV channels with travel shows, two from the YouTube channel of a videoblogger well-known for travelling to exotic places; two others from their family members; two more on recommendations from friends, and only one informant generated their organic image during the course of communications with a travel agency. Regarding the latter, the specifics of incoming tourism in Yakutia is characterized by travel agencies providing packages of services. It is a natural procedure to provide an overview for all available tourist attractions, or to sell the park as a part of a bundle of packages.

The informants that have been introduced to the destination of Yakutia prior to visit have held the connection with the atmosphere that has been promoted in that movies about remote wild place that is hidden from a mass eye and therefore becomes a valuable asset for an experienced traveler. Yet this study has made me think, that though the respondent stick to the image broadcasted by the movies, video blogs and other cinematic material, there is still a space for the expansion of the image. Therefore, the movie might set a theoretical and emotional basis for the initial image, but as it develops through the active immersion, the conditions that might have not been noted in the movie will have stronger effect, which is supported by Gunn, Echtner and Ritchie, Gartner, Pearce by stating the dominant effect of affectual component. The visitors some of whom watched the movies about northern areas of Yakutia had their expectations to become wider due to the drastic change of scenery, which is surely very different depending on a season. This may lead the results into direction of involving the several representations of the video social media marketing in order to create various positive images in prospective tourists. And it surely becomes an addition to the previous research and findings of this study do support the statement of lasting pre-visit image received from movies and video material.

Only one informant was introduced to the destination by a direct promotional source—a travel agency. Resultantly, the destination image of Lena Pillars skipped the organic stage of image formation and instead generated an induced image. This circumstance relates to the concept of familiarity, because all the other informants had already moved through the natural process of forming a first impression. Yet, here comes a moment that the induced image, i.e. the one that has been created with the intention to sell and promote, it

seemed to have created the mistrust from the respondent side. As it was discussed earlier, the affectual component which is emotional, tends to last if been implied earlier than in an immersion stage. Therefore, it is unfortunate to create the emotional response of mistrust in potential clients by creating an impression of painting a picture that the visitor initially does not trust and believe.

At the time of conducting interviews, the information informants had given regarding the destination was scarce and consisted mainly of specifics relating to the destination's description, such as "beautiful rocks", "good view" as well as instructions from the travel agency about necessary equipment and description of itineraries. However, the biggest affective anticipation was observed within informants whose organic image of the destination was shaped by TV channels and YouTube videos. These channels contained more visual and descriptive information.

Such an observation confirms Beerli and Martin's (2004) statement regarding a direct correlation between cognitive attributes providing functional information, which in turn influences affective attributes. Having more information to reflect on, for example, information about things to expect such as landscape, transportation processes, travel routes and a local cultural introduction, enabled informants to create organic images on the basis of structurally organized information (which is expected given the promotional purposes blogging video). This further information settled familiar points already existing in informants' minds during interviews, thereby creating expectation.

The concept of expectation was one of the main objectives imbued in the first interview. As Holloway and Humphrey (2012) stated expectation is closely connected to the purpose of and motivation for travel. Expectations and motivations for visiting Yakutia varied. Those who had searched for information had preliminary information about Lena Pillars, and therefore had greater anticipation and motivation to visit it. They also paid more attention to information from the travel agency. Comparatively, one informant who agreed to take the trip as a part of a package deal had a lower level of interest and expectation.

As already noted, Lena Pillars is a nature park located in a geographically distant area. Visitation to the Lena Pillars is legally allowed but only in the daytime. Therefore, visits to the park usually implies a one-day tour. Subsequently, the entertainment program is limited, introductory in nature and repetitive. Hosts' expectations are aimed only at first-time visitors.

There is a close correlation between familiarity of a destination and travel decision-making (Kim & Richardson, 2003). Specifically, the more well-known and familiar a destination, the easier it is for customers to make a decision to travel there. After making the decision to go to a destination, prospective tourists engage in the process of travel anticipation. Choi (2001) underlines the importance of familiarity in decision making. Customers often tend to justify their choices and organize objective reality using subjective interpretations to confirm pre-determined ideas. Thus, as a customer decides to travel based on familiarity, along with functional and affective motivations, she/he will subconsciously try to analyze the perceived information and experience in a way to justify their choice to travel to the location. Consequently, given the distant location and high cost of travel to Yakutia and to the destination of Lena Pillars make it challenging to attract tourists. It is unlikely that a tourist would travel the distance and related travel costs solely for the purpose of a one-day visit to the park.

Hsu, Wolfe and Kang (2004) assessed the images of destinations with limited comparative advantages due to specific local circumstances. With limited resources and market reach, planning and management of priorities is essential. As a market niche is defined, the natural development process involves investigation of additional competitive advantages. In the case of Lena Pillars, other services provided by travel agencies can be used to leverage competitive advantages. Such advantages were utilized by all informants, who reported positively about engagements in other touristic activities in Yakutia instead of solely visiting Lena Pillars. Moreover, in the last interviews, informants responded negatively towards visitation to Lena Pillars if it had been the only or the most significant reason to travel to the republic. Thus, since the Lena Pillars Nature Park has limited resources and facilities, as Hsu et al. suggested, it is necessary to make logical and compatible plans together with the area's tourism ministry in order to facilitate its

competitive facility properties as a tourism destination. Moreover, it is essential to perform together with all the tourism businesses and to use the same strategy to attract customers. One way to do this, is to aim for achievable goals, such as niche tourism.

In my study, during the analysis of the open-ended questionnaire field notes, the main features that affected informants' perceptions at the study location were identified. I used those features in the last set of interviews to gain further elaboration and to determine their importance on the overall picture of the park. This decision was based on Hanlan, Fuller and Wilde's (2006) recommendation to determine the influences of on-site trip experiences as these create the major basis of the overall image.

The process of destination image formation happens in stages, the ongoing experience stage is only a part of the whole. Yet, this part effects the overall picture more effectively than the pre-visit stage. Informants held certain expectations prior to travel to the Lena Pillars Nature Park, their vision of the location was transformed given the actual reality of the experience. For some this was quite a positive experience, which included an introduction to local culture through story telling. Other parts of the experience caused significant discomfort, which changed informants' perceptions. For example, earlier perceptions did not consider the major physical discomfort of mosquito bites. The nature park is located in a preservation area surrounded by taiga forest, a seemingly simple descriptive feature. It is a feature that masks mosquito issues. That being said, despite informants being warned by the travel agency about the insect situation, mosquitos turned out to be a factor of great inconvenience for all the tourists.

Relatedly, Gartner and Tasci (2007) refer to a state of circumstances, that divides the natural features of a destination into static and semi-dynamic features. Even though the insect component of park circumstances appeared dynamic, it is in fact a static condition. For people unused to living in permanent contact with mosquitos, they do not perceive them as a static ever-present condition. Yet, in the conditions of Arctic nature tourism this feature is static, while the factor of the weather another influencing factor of experiences is dynamic.

As noted in Chapter 2, the attributes of destination image effect the image formation process on an interdimensional level. The mosquito issue is a tangible functional component that significantly influenced the affective component, and therefore inescapably became an important piece of the overall picture. As Beerli and Martin (2004) noted a factor circulates from cognitive to affective and back to cognitive features again. As a static state of natural functional circumstances of the location, such factors become inseparable from the end perception of the place, and thereby contribute to the overall destination image.

Throughout the whole interviewing process, the research question strove to determine factors that might affect the overall picture negatively, and the objectives were to follow the concept of satisfaction. As presented in Chapter 2, the following sequence is relevant for creating a satisfactory experience: pre-visit image -> expectation -> experience immersion -> expectation met/not met -> satisfactory/unsatisfactory travel -> overall image.

After investigating the pre-visit image and exploring informants´ expectations, my focus turned to the experience immersion stage, and whether informants found it satisfactory, and what factors influenced their experiences.

While mosquitos had a significant negative influence on personal comfort, surprisingly, in the last stage of interviews, informants continued to express a clear irritation with regard to mosquitos. Albeit they did not perceive them as a negative feature of the destination, instead they perceived mosquitos as an unfortunate by-product-feature. This is reminiscent of Gartner and Tasci´s (2007) commentary regarding the static nature of features being perceived as an *a priori* state of the location and therefore does not generate conflict between expectation and reality.

The major feature that negatively affected the overall picture of the Lena Pillars Nature Park across all informants was the lack of infrastructural facilities. As a dynamic functional state, it left an impact on tourists' perception. This lack of facilities left informants with an impression of not receiving proper touristic services. From their perspectives, this seemed to be easily manageable yet was not delivered. Subsequently,

in the linear sequence of satisfactory destination image formation, this lack was a disruptive influence on overall satisfaction.

The overall destination picture is a complex mix of all the features and components affecting it. At its core, the picture is formed by delivering major expected values, which in the case of this study was the rock formations of the Lena Pillars Nature Park.

All the informants expressed satisfaction with the landscape of the nature park, and admitted its delivery was a core value.

Therefore, as their main expectations were met, informants admitted that the overall experience was satisfactory. Yet, the core experience, albeit important, was only a part of the overall image. And the noted features of negative influence were of equal influence.

The intention to revisit is an indicator of satisfaction (Pizam & Milman, 1993). Revisitation was explored with informants during interviews. Informants in my study indicated no intention to revisit the Lena Pillars Nature Park even though all the interviewees admitted the travel experience was satisfactory. As discussed by Hsu et al., the reason for refusing to revisit is a functional matter, where the functional circumstances of the locations define the strategy for development, management, as well as product measurement and service delivery satisfaction. The Lena Pillars Nature Park is primarily focused on first-time visitors. Moreover, due to its distant location, high cost of transportation to the republic and park's location, the limited nature of walking routes due to the preservation policy, as a destination, it has limited possibilities and capabilities to deliver repetitive experience satisfaction.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

In this research, my research aim was to investigate possible components of the Lena Pillars Nature Park destination image that affect the intention to revisit or to recommend.

I conducted 10 interviews in two stages (pre-visit and post-visit) and one open-ended questionnaire, which was filled out during tourists ongoing experiences.

In Chapter 2, by reviewing previously conducted theoretical foundations associated with the concept of destination image, I made research choices in preference for sampling such as setting the selection criteria on first-time visitors.

Throughout the interviews´ coding and categorizing process, the main themes were detected and presented in the findings.

Detected features that affected the perception of the informants negatively were primarily associated with functional characteristics such as static natural circumstances of insect abundance; limited time and offerings for transportation options; lack of infrastructural facilities that informants interpreted as limited delivery of touristic service.

In all stages of my interviews, I detected that there was a clear perception by the tourists that the tour was exclusively a one-time travel experience. During the last stage of the interviews, it was found that the main reason for such a perception was the cost of travel. The reasons for such costs are simple, as the Republic of Sakha has a critically low level of population for its vast territory, and therefore, due to the comparatively low demand for transport supply, travel costs of inbound and outbound travel to and from the Republic are very high. Four informants mentioned that the cost of travel to Sakha was equivalent to three beach destination package deals.

This is to become the main discovery to the research question. As all the tourists have a clear intention to only come for one-time visit, the unexpected short visitation without

possibility to prolong the visit on the shore was the biggest discomfort and negative influence in the perception of their travel.

However, all of the informants identified their travel as a positive experience, and their overall destination image of the Lena Pillars Nature Park was satisfactory. Informants also expressed their intention to recommend the Park to their networks.

This moment is essential within the frame of the destination image formation concept, as the example of positively formed destination image in the circumstances of various affective components as they are natural formation agents for the organic image for the prospective visitors.

The fascination of the natural landscape and introduction to exotic cultural features, in combination with the discomforting and unpleasant physical senses stimuli and dissatisfaction with functional characteristics of the experience resulted in the tourists defining the destination image as satisfactory and meeting their expectations.

This research thus contributes to a better understanding of the influence of satisfaction associated with meeting the expectations from the pre-visit and overall destination image of the Lena Pillars Nature Park. It will contribute to the development of marketing and management strategy for the Lena Pillars Nature Park in order to assess the identified challenges in meeting the expectations of the visitors to the best possible extent.

As it had been confirmed, the effect of the video material channeled through the various sources had a great impact on the pre-visit and the post-visitation had not been changed drastically it is advised to the management of the park to focus on the pre-visit and the components of the promise.

I want once again to underline the influence of information and conditions, the importance of delivering advertised promises with regard to forming a satisfactory overall image of a destination; to improve the process of creating the promise through the pre-image and importance of nature tourism motivation image as there are no technical facilities to improve the natural circumstances once the promise of this tourism niche shows to be false. Therefore, it is essential to develop and manage the pre-visit image of

the Lena Pillars Nature Park in order to set and meet expectations and create a successful overall destination image.

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Appendices

Picture 1. Location of Lena Pillars nature park on the map of Yakutia
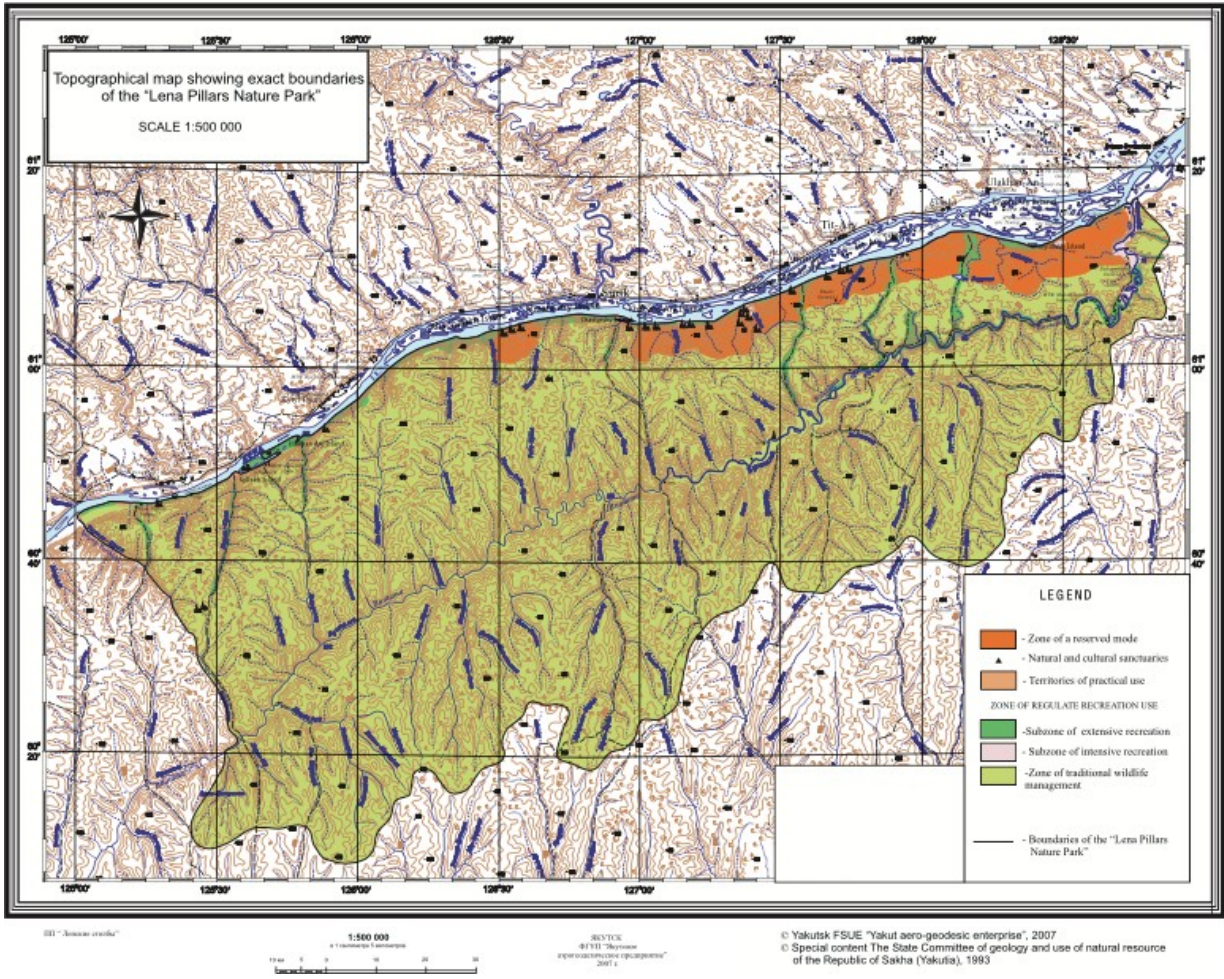
Picture 2. Topographical map of Lena Pillars nature park´s boundaries zoning
unescoworldheritage.com

Picture 3. The Lena Pillars rock formations. mypolarworld.com

Appendix Y

Interview template

- Where are you from?
- How old are you?
- Have you traveled before? To where?
- What travel shows, podcasts, channels, accounts do you usually watch/listen/follow?
- What do you know about the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)?
- Where did find the information about the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)?
- What do you know about Lena pillars nature park?
- Where did you find information about Lena pillars?
- Did you visit the website of your tourism agency? Did you visit the website related to tourism in Yakutia?
- Why did you decide to visit Yakutia?
- What was the reason for you to visit Lena pillars nature park?

Appendix YY

Questionnaire template

How would you describe your impression of nature park at the current moment?

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What moment would you describe as the best feature in nature park?

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Was there any inconvenience or moment of discomfort to influence this experience?

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Are there any suggestions for the improvement of this experience?

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Appendix YYY

Interview template

- What are your thoughts and impressions about Lena pillars now?
- Was there a change of impression between before and after visitation? Which one?
- Have you gained any facts-based knowledge while visiting Lena pillars nature park? (Where you following/listening to the guide?)
- How did you feel while being on the territory of Lena pillars nature park?
- Was there something to cause inconvenience or to interrupt or to discomfort the experience of visiting nature park?
- Would you recommend visiting Lena pillars nature park to others?
- What would your advice for the future visitors would be?
- Would you like to visit Lena pillars nature park second time in the future?