Experiences of Finnish Ski Tourists in Sweden

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Abstract

Date

Author	
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Degree programme	
Degree Program in Tourism	
Report/thesis title Experiences of Finnish Ski Tourists in Sweden	**Number of pages and appendix pages** 35+1

The amount of Finnish visitors to SkiStar resorts have been declining in recent years. This thesis researches reasons why that, and uses information about SkiStar, theory about sports tourism and tourism experience in general, and qualitative interviews to reach its conclusion.

SkiStar is the biggest company in the Nordics supplying downhill- and other winter experiences, and over the years they've been growing as a whole, but less and less Finns visit their resorts. As their resorts mainly focus on sports tourism, which globally is growing, both active and passive sports tourism, they expected the Finns to continue to come to their resorts.

As all tourist experiences are based around the concept of doing something that people don't normally do in their everyday life, resorts must come up with way of attracting customers, and this all is based around 4 parameters, Active, passive, Immersive and Absorb. Around these 4 parameters tourist attractions work as they cover the spectra of experiences. SkiStar's resorts mainly provide Active Immersion, also called Escapist experiences as skiers are actively taken part in activities that are physical and takes place outside. There are parts of passive and absorb as well, but it's not a big part of the experiences provided.

Seven active Finnish skiers with different backgrounds were interviewed in October 2017, whom all of which have visited at least one SkiStar resort. They were all active travellers, and had all been in numerous ski resorts throughout the world. It becomes apparent that in general is doing an excellent job with their resorts. Their Finnish visitors have in large part been happy with their visits to Sweden, almost all of which have been exclusively to Åre, which they believe can compete on a global market with its excellent slopes and after-ski activities.

The research shows, however, that SkiStar, and its resorts, are largely unknown in Finland. The only thing that seem to have any sort of recognition is Åre as a Town. Only 1 out of 7 even remember the name SkiStar, while the rest barely knowing that there was a company that held such large operations throughout the Nordics. A few of the interviewees also mention the lack of useful information for more senior skiers on SkiStar's webpages, but also while at their resorts.

However, all interviewees believe that there are good potentials to growth within the Finnish market if SkiStar market itself better towards the Finnish market. According to the interviewees there is a hunger for winter vacations among the Finns, but there is a lack of knowledge of destinations outside the most famous ones in the Alps.

Keywords
Experiences, Tourism, Finnish tourists, Skiing, Travelling

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1   Introduction

This thesis came to be from the idea that the author should write for a company that has a big part of its organization in the author's home county, Jämtland. As the author is currently completing his B.B.A with the focus on tourism at Haaga-Helia UAS, Porvoo Campus, it was reasonable to write for SkiStar, which is one of the biggest tourism companies operating in the county. This is the result of SkiStar operating the skiing services in the town of Åre, but also the smaller town of Vemdalen. Both of which are crucial for Jämtland's tourism and thus its economy as a whole.

The aims of this thesis were:

- To get an understanding of what Finns expect during a skiing holiday to Sweden, and thus being able to give SkiStar recommendation on how to attract more Finnish visitors.

The decrease of the Finnish visitors became the main research problem for this thesis. These research problems were structured by the aim of the thesis.

The research questions of this study were:
1. Why have the number of Finnish visitors to SkiStar destinations decreased?
2. How could SkiStar attract more Finnish visitors?

This aim was to be used in the design of the interview, and the interview was designed to answer the research questions using the aim as a guideline throughout the thesis. All interviews were conducted over 2 weeks in the end of October 2017.

The theory will focus on sports tourism, with a delve deeper into the subgroups Active, Passive, and Nostalgic Sports tourism. As larger skiing destinations can provide more than just ski-slopes this fits the narrative of this thesis well. This thesis will also try to get a greater understanding on tourism experiences in general and what tourists have come to expect from a vacation.

As the reason for this thesis is to look deeper into Finnish skiing tourism behaviour the author decided to use qualitative interviews, more precisely themed interviews. As the topic is about skiing it seemed reasonable to focus on that. The aim was to get eight high-quality interviews with active Finnish skiers that had visited at least one SkiStar resort at one point in time.

The structure of this thesis will follow Haaga-Helia standard. This will include Introduction, research about the commissioner – SkiStar, theory about sports tourism and tourism experiences, Methodology, Results from the data collected, conclusion, and bibliography.

2   SkiStar as a company

SkiStar is Scandinavia's leading Alpine skiing company with 6 major resorts, the majority of which is located in Sweden and Norway, but the company also have a resort in Tirol, Austria. As a benchmark company in the Nordics they attract tourists from all over the world, with the majority coming from Northern Europe and the Nordics. This chapter presents the history, business model, operational and marketing strategies of SkiStar.

2.1   The History of SkiStar

SkiStar was founded in 1975 under the name Lindvallen AB by the two brothers Mats and Erik Paulson when they bought 40% of the ski-resort Lindvallen in western Dalarna. Three years later they bought the remaining 60%, becoming full owners of the resort. At that point Lindvallen was just a small hotel with a nearby holiday village and a few ski-lifts. The Number of visitors increased yearly, which led to the growth of the resort, and over the coming 11 years the company kept investing in Lindvallen. In 1986 the company bought 2 of its competitors, the nearby resort of Högfjället in full, and Hundfjället in part. These two resorts were already developed and Högfjällshotellet was well-known among skiers as a corner-stone of Swedish winter tourism. On the 8th of July in 1994 the company got publicly quoted on the Stockholm stock market, and soon after in 1997 Lindvallen AB acquired full ownership of Tandådalen and Hundfjället, and by doing so the company change its name to Sälenstjärnan AB. This acquisition made it the biggest downhill skiing area in Sweden under the common name of Sälen, the Swedish word for The Seal. (SkiStar, 2016)

At this point Sälenstjärnan ABs biggest competitors are Åre, and Vemdalen ski-resorts in Sweden, Trysil ski resort in Norway, and the different resorts in the Alps down in Europe. Sälenstjärnan took the decision to buy Åre and Vemdalen ski-resorts in 1999 and by doing so becoming the biggest Ski-tourism company in the Nordics. As both Åre and Vemdalen is a substantial distance from Sälenstjärnans original resorts they decided to change the name to a name that could function in both resorts, and also compete on the global market. The result was that in 2001, they register under the new name of SkiStar. The year prior the company bought their first ski-resort outside Sweden, namely Hemsedal Skisenter in Norway. The coming year the investments heavily increased in Åre to make it a global force in downhill skiing. This included charter flights from nearby Åre-Östersund Airport to Stockholm, Copenhagen and Helsinki. In present day only regular flights to and from Stockholm are available of the 3 that existed. (SkiStar, 2017)

As SkiStar grew in rapid succession in the 90s, they spent the first years of the new millennia on improving their existing resorts. However, in 2005 they acquired the biggest ski resort in the Nordics outside Sweden, namely Trysil in Norway. This acquisition was difficult to complete because the Norwegian Competition Authorities at first deemed the acquisition as too monopolistic. This was overruled and in November 2005, Trysil was under the SkiStar banner. (aktiespararna.se, 2005) As of 2006 Hammarbytoppen in Stockholm, is run by SkiStar though Stockholm City still owns the premises. For the following years SkiStar focused on improving their current resorts until 2016 when the company took the move down to Europe by acquiring a majority in the Austrian ski-resort St Johann in Tirol to be able to compete with the other alp ski-resorts. Figure 1 shows the locations of the destination currently run by SkiStar. (SkiStar, 2017)

Figure 1. Map of Europe with SkiStar's destinations marked out. (SkiStar, 2017)

2.2   SkiStar's business model

"SkiStar's core business is alpine skiing, with a focus on the guests' skiing experience. Our long-term goal is to run profitable and strategic operations in alpine skiing, ski schools, ski rental and accommodation within SkiStar's organisation at our various destinations." (Skistar.com, 2017)

This excerpt captures the spirit of SkiStar as a company and what they strive for. Their vision of being a leader in the tourism industry shines through in every part of the company and their goals.

2.2.1 Business Statistics

SkiStar as a company rely to a large part on seasonal employees. This is a reflexion of how their business mainly is based on winter experiences. In the season 2015/2016 Ski-Star had 2405 employees, 408 of those were full-time employees that work year-round. Full-time employees are spread out in all of SkiStar's major sites with the majority working in Sälen where the headquarter is located. The average age of full-time employees is 46 years, and 36% are women. (SkiStar, 2017)

SkiStar's revenues have been steadily climbing over the last 5 years and in the 2016/2017 season the company reached 2,306 billion SEK in revenue, of which a 387 million SEK was profit. This is the result of controlling 50% of the downhill market in Sweden, 31% in Norway, and 42% overall in the Nordics. (SkiStar, 2017)

2.2.2 Operational strategies

SkiStar aims to have a high-quality product that produces return customers, hoping this will serve them as a marketing tool in mouth-to-mouth channels. Services on SkiStar's re-sorts needs to be within walking distance from where the customers live, that includes your everyday services as supermarkets and restaurants, but also ski-lifts and rental of equipment. By doing this the customers don't have to rely on their car during their stay which create a more pleasant atmosphere. Transportation to, and from SkiStar's destina-tions should be easy to access, and customers should have many different ways to travel, not only by car. (SkiStar, 2017)

2.2.3 Marketing Strategies

SkiStar describes that their main marketing tool is other visitors. They believe that by in-creasing the percentage of yearly skiers world-wide using SkiStar's services, SkiStar will be seen by more potential customers when they hear about it from friends and family. This coupled with using one website for all destinations will create chances for more sales within the same portal, minimizing the need for middle-men. This makes booking more ef-ficient for both customers and SkiStar, which in long-term increases sales. This reduces the need for sales-people and increases SkiStar's register of customers which improve the company's understanding of their clients. SkiStar have a Facebook page they use weekly, where they post news and updates about the different SkiStar resorts. (SkiStar, 2017)

2.2.4 Leadership strategies

SkiStar's leadership style focuses on teaching and educating its staff, and constantly improving the service methods. SkiStar encourages change and new ways of doing things in order to find the best way of serving customers, which are always considered the main priority. SkiStar strives to provide an ease-of-access experience for their guests and continuously gathers feedback from customers to be able to improve and adapt to changes in the market. New employees are chosen based on their attitude and its seen as a corner-stone that employees are happy and welcoming. (SkiStar, 2017)

3   Sports tourism in general

"In terms of popular participation, and in some aspect of practice, (sport and tourism) are inextricably linked… and there are sounds reasons for those links to strengthen." (Glyptis 1989, 3)

This chapter will focus on sports tourism as a phenomenon, and how it has been difficult to confine it over the years. As SkiStar's main business is downhill skiing, it's important to understand the sporting aspect of the travelling behaviour of tourists around the world.

3.1   Sports tourism

Sports tourism is a growing market that used to be confined to the dedicated and active. This is changing rapidly, as sports tourism is expanding to a wider audience that demands more and more of their holiday providers. In this chapter, we will delve deeper into sports tourism as a concept and also gain an understanding in the different areas that the subject involves. The main areas we will focus on is active, passive, and nostalgic sports tourism. (Hinch 2011, 4-6)

3.1.1   Sports tourism

As travelling becomes more and more common, so does large sporting events. As people have gained access to more information than they ever had before, their curiosity of different activities they can take part in have sky-rocketed. In the early days, tourism people mainly travelled to enjoy seeing things they haven't seen before, mainly nature, or cities. This dynamic has now shifted and people are looking for more participative tourism. This has now also changed how service providers handle tourists as a whole. Now people travel for more specific reasons, and one of those reasons is sports. (Hinch 2011, 4-6)

Sports is a big part of the societal structure, and often a subject of pride and honour. Today people want to join their favourite athletes in locations where they are competing, cheering them on, hoping they'll bring home the gold medal, but also enjoy the locations after the competition is done. They want to try out the slopes, tracks, or courses where their idols competed. This mean that not only great sporting cities, but also cities less known for their sports, need to start providing to sports tourist to be able to compete on the global market. This is of special importance since sports tourists tend to spend more money at their destination than the average tourist. Not only the tourists that just travel to watch competitions spend more, but the tourists who participate in the sports are big spenders as well. As sports is a costly hobby, destinations have to make sure they have

all the facilities needed to make the most of their active visitors. The emergence of cities like Åre, Sweden, and Sochi, Russia, are a direct result of this. Before sports took hold of the cities, they were barely on the map with tiny populations, but now have hundreds of thousands of visitors every year with tens of thousands of hotel beds. This shows the importance of adapting to your visitors, and providing a service that can compete in an international environment. (Hinch 2011, 4-6)

3.1.2 Active sport tourism

People who engage in active sports tourism are individuals who travel to a location to participate in the different sports themselves. This can be people who travel to Scotland to play golf, travel to London to participate in the London marathon, or to the Alps to enjoy the slopes on snowboard. Active sports tourists have special needs compared to other tourists as they tend to have higher requirements on the venues and locations than other visitors. This is because they want to ensure that there is no problems during their stay, and want to be able to focus on their activities and less time on normally time-consuming things, like transportation and dealing with service personnel. This creates challenges for venues and cities that want to provide an experience for their visitors that makes them come back, over and over again. (Gibson 2010, 155-170)

One of the main objectives for service providers is to minimise the time their customers have to travel from where they get their daily services, such as where they shop, eat, and sleep, to where they get to practise their sports. This has been solved with having hotels and other accommodations just next to the sports venues. A few examples of this is Ski-in and ski-out hotels in ski-resorts where you can ski all the way up to the door of your hotel, or where you live by the beginning of the golf course in golfing-resorts. This does not only reduce travel times for participants, but also give them a more immersive experience as a whole. (Hinch 2011, 42-51)

Active sports tourists also need more specialised services than regular tourists. They need access to physicians in case of injury or need for rehabilitation. They need places where they can fix their own equipment, or buy new equipment. They need relaxation after a long day of sports so access to spa treatment is something that is valued highly among active sports tourists. This is why hotels are rarely just hotels at venues like these, but more rehabilitations facilities where customers can access all their needs under one roof. These facilities must be of a high standard to provide the service needed to attract return customers. (Hinch 2011, 42-51)

Often the destination itself is of less importance to these tourists than regular tourists. As they are less focused on sightseeing and experiencing normal tourist attractions, a sports tourist is more willing to go to smaller towns which has less to offer to normal tourists, as long as they have all the services needed to practise their sport to the fullest. This can have its downsides as this makes towns that focus on sports tourism lack basic entertainment that the common tourist has come to see as standard in bigger cities, such as cinemas, shopping centres and more. This makes it difficult to attract regular tourists that want to spend their days sightseeing or shopping, rather than actively participate in sports. (Hinch 2011, 42-51)

3.1.3   Passive sport tourism

Passive sports tourism is a second part of sport events tourism since it revolves around visiting small, or large events focusing on sports. Examples of this can be travelling to the Olympic games as a spectator, to the world cup in football, or just to a small-scale sporting event, such as a regional qualifier in tennis. These events are often well-planned with their infrastructure being in place to handle massive crowds and a high number of attendees. It is important that these locations can accommodate contestants, and visitors, poor and wealthy alike. (Hinch 2011, 52-57)

There are different types of attendees at different events. For instance, there are the die-hard fans who travel to a destination just for the event and have little interest in the destination as a whole. These tourists are easier to accommodate than others since their requirements are mainly that it should be easy to get to the event and back. An example of this can be hard-core football fans that travel with their team when they play their games abroad, and as soon as the game is finished they fly back home. (Hinch 2011, 52-57)

Attendees who travel to larger events and stay in the destination to experience more than just the sports event are a lot more common and they are thus the biggest, and most important market when it comes to passive sports tourism. They like to combine the event with destination travel. An example of this was the Olympics in Athens where a lot of tourists got to experience the competitions, but also all the regular tourist attractions Athens has to offer. These tourists want to be able to get around the cities and events with ease to be able to fit everything into their schedule, so transportation is important. Unlike active sports tourists the vicinity of the accommodation to the venue not crucial, as long there are many options to travel to where they need to be for the day. Information about the event and the city has to be provided by the accommodation in order to keep visitors occupied and happy. (Hinch 2011, 52-57)

Incidental passive sports tourist is a 3rd group that needs to be taken into consideration as they are the ones who fill the last seats at the different sporting events. These tourists are people who travel for the destination, or even for business, and while they're at the destination, they want to experience events that are incidentally happening at the time. Examples of this can be people on a city get-away to Madrid who incidentally timed it with a football match between Real Madrid and Valencia and spontaneously decide to go and see it, or tourists who travel to Thailand and after a long day at the beach, they go and visit a Thai-boxing match. These tourists mainly need information about different events as their behaviour is sporadic and they choose where to go as they go along. (Gammon 2007, 11-18)

3.1.4 Nostalgia sports tourism

A new way of seeing sports tourism is nostalgia sports tourism, which is even less participative than passive sports tourism. This group of tourists travel to destinations to experience and learn about previous sporting events. This is a group that is yet to be fully understood as they are quite a niche group. They travel to places like Munich during the summer when football is in off-season to visit Bayern München's home area Allianz Area to visit its museum to learn about the history of Bayern München. Another example is when tourists travel to Oslo to visit the famous ski-jumping hill Holmenkollen even though it's not winter. The needs of these tourists are very similar to regular tourists, as these sport related experiences are in a grey-zone between normal tourist attractions and passive sports tourist attractions. These kinds of tourists highly value memorabilia and re-enactments they get to take part in to get to feel like their sport heroes. This type of sports tourism has a lot of room to grow, and attracts more and more tourists every year. (Hinch 2011, 58-59)

3.2 Ski tourism

Ski tourism, often mistakenly being interchanged with Alpine tourism, is the act of travelling to a destination to partake in winter sports, with a focus on downhill skiing, including snowboarding and other modes getting down the slopes. Alpine tourism on the other hand is tourism to the geographical regions that a mountainous, most often above the tree limit, which does not necessarily have to include winter sports. (Dictionary, 2017)

3.2.1 The history of Ski Tourism

The origin of skiing is disputed, with some historians claiming it originates from the Altay Mountains in China dating back to 3000BC, while Norwegian archaeologists have carbon-dated ski-tips found in Russia to 6000BC. Back then skis weren't used for entertainment, but for getting around in snowy landscapes, and hunting (Jenkins 2013). In 1868, the first documented ski tourists were Norwegians travelling on skis from Telemark to Oslo for leisure purposes, and two decades later North American Skiing areas started to emerge with Europe following shortly. These areas were merely hotels in snowy regions with no lifts, so a considerable amount of time was spent climbing and walking in snow to get up the hills in order to ride down. This all changed in 1910 when the Swiss town of Mürren opened the Lauterburnnen-Mürren railway that could transport people uphill. The following year the first draglift opened and the concept spread fast around the world the following years. (Hudson 2015, 7-13)

In 1924, downhill skiing was made an Olympic sport. This gave skiing the attention it needed to gain significant popularity in most of western Europe and North America, and then in 1929 the first mechanically driven lift was created in Canada. Within the next decade Union Pacific developed the world's first ski resort solely for tourists. Similar developments were taken on in Megève in France. At this point skiing was still seen as a small-scale tourism sector, but this were to change after the second world war when people found a great interest in skiing, which had a lot to do with the combatants who were fighting in the north, to whom skiing was an important tool for waging war. Returning soldiers brought with them the skills they learnt and wanted to keep skiing recreationally after the war ended. (Hudson 2015, 7-13)

The 1960s is seen as the start of the "Great Ski Boom". In North America and Europe ski-resorts develop into large complexes that could supply most of the needs of any given tourist, from skiing, to fine-dining, and high-class lodging. This kept going until the 1980s when the market started to out-supply the demand and the development halted. The amount of ski-resorts declined by 18% in North America alone during this time. The skiing market saw a massive rebound in the 90s however, with the massive popularity of the snowboard that just entered the market in full force. The fast learning curve of snowboarding made it a new favourite pastime for skiers all over the world. Snowboarding wasn't alone in the great comeback of the 90s, the development of a new type of ski that was shapelier was easier to control than its straight-edge counter-part which had been used for decades. (Hudson 2015, 7-13)

As tourism is developing in a rapid pace all around the globe, the ski-resorts have in the last 2 decades focused on providing more winter experiences than just down-hill skiing. Things like dog-sledding, snowmobile safari, and ice-skating are now stable activities most bigger ski-resorts offer. (Hudson 2015, 7-13)

3.2.2 Statistics within the Skiing industry

As of 2017 there are 67 countries that offers some sort of downhill skiing on outside hills covered in snow, but if countries with indoor and dry slopes are included then that number reaches into the hundreds. These numbers are expected to grow as more and more countries try to jump on the skiing band wagon. Markets in Eastern Europe and China is now focusing on expanding their skiing possibilities to attract both international and local visitors. Other smaller markets have also started to emerge in more surprising destinations such as in Greece, Iran, Morocco and South Africa. Markets in South America are expected to develop in the future as many countries in South America have mountains that get snow on a yearly basis, mainly Chile and Argentina. (Vanat 2017)

Skiing has been a stable business in most regions around the globe (except some notable exceptions like in Japan that has seen a drastic decrease) with around 350-400 million ski visits every year for the last 10 years. Of these ski visits the 43% take place in the Alps and 21% in North America. Japan, China, and Europe (excluding the Alps) taking the bulk of remaining ski visits. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the amount of skiing days around the world. (Vanat 2017)
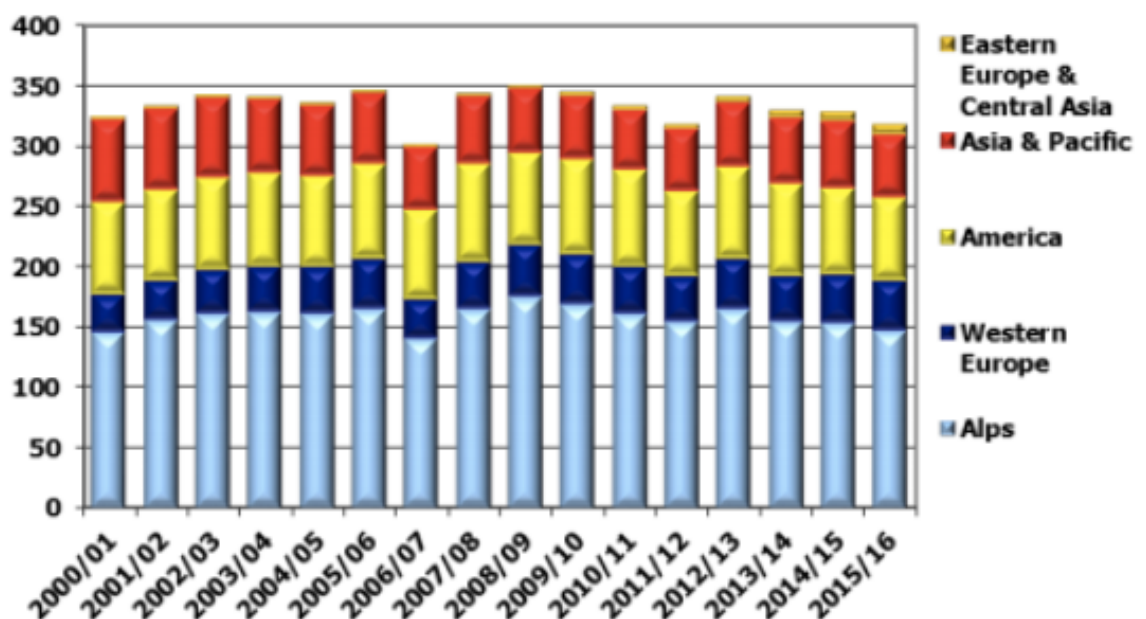

Figure 2. Skier visits per region in millions (Vanat 2017)

3.3   Tourism experiences

The main reason for all tourism is to get away from everyday life, and experience something the tourist would not experience at home. As all tourists come from different backgrounds and have different origins this makes it a challenge to provide experiences that the highest possible numbers of tourists can take part in. In today's tourism industry, it has become more important than ever before to ensure a good experience for its visitors. In earlier times the destination itself was often enough to lure tourists to travel. This is no longer the case as tourists require more to be satisfied. This has forced tourist attractions to expand their organizations to include more activities. These activities can differ a lot from each other and most organizations try to focus on just a handful of activities. (Pine&Gilmore 1999, 30-38)

3.3.1   Tourism experiences

All tourists experience things differently, this makes it difficult to pinpoint what an experience provider shall focus on. It's important that all experiences are taken into consideration, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant they might be. As a vacation is a series of experiences, it's important that the good experiences out-weight the bad experiences. This is to ensure that the memories created from said vacation are seen in a positive light. After the vacation is over and people return to their everyday life it is more likely that they mention their vacation and recommends others to do the same trip, thus spreading the awareness of the destination. (Pine&Gilmore 1999, 30-38)

3.3.2   The 4 dimensions of Tourism experiences

Pine and Gilmore have classified these different experiences in 4 categories, absorption, immersion, passive, and active. These 4 categories are then grouped into 4 separate subgroups. They define them as such:

1. The extent of participation from the tourist (Active/Passive)
2. The emotional mode and the extent of involvement in the experience (Absorption/Immersion)

In combination with each other these can identify different type of experiences. The figure 3 below shows how these combinations play out. (Pine&Gilmore 1999, 30-38)
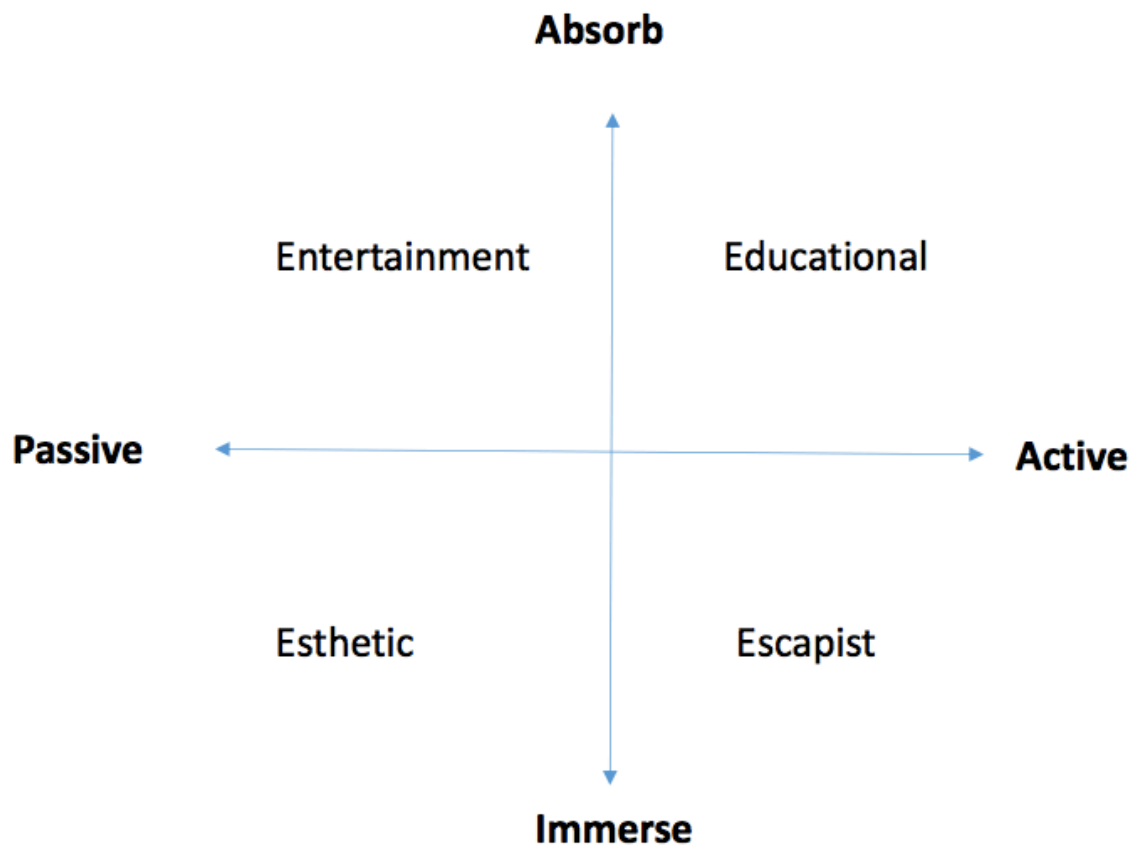
Figure 3. The tourism experience axes (Pine&Gilmore 1999, 30)

Using these dimension Pine and Gilmore argues that you can explain most tourist attraction that exists on a large scale. Some examples of experiences in these subdivisions are: (Pine&Gilmore 1999, 30-38)

- Entertainment – Watching musicals on Broadway, New York, or Watching Premier League in Manchester, England
- Educational – Cooking trip to Tuscany, Italy, or Learning how to Ski in Åre, Sweden
- Esthetic – Visiting St. Peters church in the Vatican, or Seeing Mona Lisa in the Louvre, Paris
- Escapist – Climbing in the Andes, Peru, or diving the Great Barrier Reef, Australia

These definitions capture most tourism experiences that are mentioned. Skiing would fall into the Escapist category as it's mainly outside in nature, with some exceptions with indoor skiing that some location provides. Outside the escapist category you find parts of Entertainment and Education in the bigger ski-resorts around the world. Big ski-resort arranges large competitions in different sports that attract visitors for entertainment purposes, but they also provide educational services, such as ski-schools. (Pine&Gilmore 1999, 30-38)

4 Methodology

This chapter will seek to explain how this thesis gathered data to analyse. It'll try to argue for why the methods used in this thesis were implemented. The author decided to use Qualitative research, more precisely using Themed interviews.

4.1 Qualitative method

Qualitative interviews are defined by J. Mason as 3 things: (Mason 2002, 62)

1. *"The interactional exchange of dialogue (between two or more participants, in face-to-face or other contexts). "*
2. *"A thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach where the researcher has topics, themes or issues they wish to cover, but with a fluid and flexible structure."*
3. *"A perspective regarding knowledge as situated and contextual, requiring the researcher to ensure that relevant contexts are brought into focus so that the situated knowledge can be produced. Meanings and understandings are created in an interaction, which is effectively a co-production, involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge."*

As the list show, Mason argues that it's important that the interview should be conducted in a conversational manner, to stay to the theme or topic, and that the interviewer must have sufficient knowledge about the topic to conduct the interview in a truthful and informed way. This is also important when it comes to analysing the results of the interviews. (Mason 2002, 62)

Qualitative methods are highly valuable when doing research on a smaller scale as the sample size is not correlated with successful research. According to Bryan Marshall there is no clear correlation between having a high number of interviews compared to a low number of interviews, the accuracy of the results is independent of sample size. Qualitative methods are also more flexible to culture factors, and thus better in case by case situations. (Marshall 2015, 11-22)

According to Mason (2010), the most important part of a high-quality research using qualitative interviews is saturation. If the saturation levels are too low the researched will be implicitly biased based on that sub-group. That's why it's important that if you are researching a sub-group, you need to divide your interviewees into smaller groups, which can be age, gender, or occupation related to name a few. (Mason 2010, 1-19)

4.1.1 Themed interviews

Themed interviews are a way of collecting data for qualitative research. It tries to dig deeper into the answers given by the participants to not only get a factual answer, but also an answer on what it means to the participant. It's also useful to explain any misunderstandings that might come from the questions asked, but also gives the possibility to the participant to voice their own opinions about the topic, which can be crucial to get a full understanding of how an interviewee think. (Aalto University, 2013)

4.2 Planning and data collection

During the planning of the interview the author had to pinpoint what kind of participants would be suited for the interview. It was decided that the interviewees had to be adults who are willing to, and have in the past, travelled for skiing purposes. A balance between gender, age, and occupation was a clear aim from the start to make the data as telling as possible. The interviews were planned to be conducted over the span of 2 weeks, and the aim was to reach 8 interviews. (Turner 2010, 757)

4.2.1 Designing the interview

To get data good enough to use in this thesis the author had to design questions that could make the participants open up about their experiences, and express their feelings about the different topics in a detailed way. It was important to avoid questions that could be answered with a yes/no answer as that wouldn't give a clear picture of what the participants thought of what they experienced. It was decided that the interview would last between 30-60 minutes and that the interview should consist of 10 questions, all of which could be expanded to get a better understanding of the thought process behind the answers. The 10 questions were divided into 3 sub-groups, travelling related, skiing related, and SkiStar related questions, with the biggest subgroup being skiing related. See interview guide, attachment 1. As the author has a lot of experience using Excel the interview was created inside an excel sheet to give it a clear structure and make it easy to cite the answers during the conduction of the interview. All interviews were recorded. (Turner 2010, 757-758)

4.2.2 Finding participants

Finding participants would turn out to be a rather simple process. The author searched for groups on Facebook dedicated to Finnish downhill skiers, and found the biggest group for

buying and selling used skiing equipment. The author contacted the admin of the page and asked for permission to post on the page asking for people who had the experiences needed to participate in the interview. This led to 1 person contacting the author, and an interview was conduct the same day. After a few days of no more answers to the post, the author decided to remove the post and leave the group.

As the author works in a large office complex with more than 50 companies under the same roof, he decided to ask on the common communication channel for all the companies in the house, Slack, if there was anyone who was interested in participating in the interview. Soon there was a woman writing the author saying that she would like to be interviewed. Once the interview was finished, she asked if there was a need for more interviewees. In her network, she had many people who are active skiers and she was able to provide contact information of two more people, both of them had been skiing in Sweden on more than one occasion. By this point four interviews had been planned, or some, already conducted.

The author knew that one of his friends had been to Åre and many other international skiing destinations over the years, and that she would be a good participant in the interview. After a discussion with her it became clear that she had many friends that also take part in recreational skiing on an international level. She asked a few of her friends if they wanted to participate, and two people agreed. The author aimed for eight interviews in total, but seven interviews would be more than enough to get a sufficient amount of information to be able to use the data gathered to get a good picture of how a sample of Finnish skiers and how they experience skiing, traveling, and their view of SkiStar.

4.2.3   Data collection in practice

Out of the seven interviews, six were done over phone or skype, and only one interview was conducted in person. Before the interview started the author told the interviewee about himself, his reasoning behind his work, and even though the author is from an area near of Åre, that the question should be answered truthfully and that the interviewee should not take any perceived biases into consideration from the author. The interviewees were also asked if they approved with being recorded, all of which agreed.

The interviews started with the interviewees stating their name, age, social status and occupation, and then the author proceeded with asking the 10 questions in order. All questions were formulated in similar ways to each participant to ensure that the question was understood the same way by all. If the answer was too short or lacking depth the author

tried to dig deeper into the experience of the interviewee, doing his best to not implement his own ideas into the answers. If an interviewee stumbled on a question, they could ask for examples of what type of answers had been given before theirs. This was necessary for some interviewees to have their memory refreshed, however, the author tried to keep it to a minimum to prevent interfering with the memory of the experience. All interviews lasted between 25-50 minutes. All the interviews were successful in terms of execution and data gathering, with the exception of one that was slightly lacklustre due to the interviewee being occupied with two toddlers during the interview, causing her to not focus too well. This is understandable due to her circumstances, but she answered the majority of the questions to her full potential.

4.3   Data analysis

Each question was analysed individually to give it the correct amount of attention. To simplify, but also keeping the identity of the participant hidden, each interviewee was given a code. The codes were A1-A7. Each analysis was started with a brief explanation of the question, and followed by three direct quotes from different participants on each question, making sure that all participants were included equally to not belittle their experiences. Quotes were selected on the bases of the quality of the quote, but also on its significance to the research. The author avoided taking quotes that repeated each other to give a broader answer to the questions. After the quotations, a short summary and analysis were made to get a better understand of the answers.

4.4   Reliability and Validity

Reliability and Validity is used in quantitative research mainly, but is now also commonly used in qualitative research. Reliability and Validity and used to make it easier to convey an honest message to the reader, and thus making the research more truthful. If the research demands it, these two concepts needs to be redefined to figure out the truth behind the research. However, that was not needed in this research. (Golafshani 2003, 1-12)

The accuracy of a research is dependent on Reliability and Validity. If either of these falters it compromises the research's authenticity and this might cause the research to be discarded by other researchers. Below the author will explain the two concepts further.

4.4.1   Reliability

According to Joppe, reliability is the extent of which your results are reliable over time if the research is conducted the same way every time (Joppe 2000). Kirk and Miller defined

the process as how the measurement would be the same if measured many times, how the measurement stays the same over time, and how similar the answers are if asked within a time-frame. (Kirk 1986, 13-14)

The reliability of a research must be taken into consideration when designing the interview to make sure that the questions open up the mind of the interviewee and that they give answers that is of value to the research. If the questions are not designed, or asked correctly the whole research can be voided by the lack of valid data. (Golafshani 2003, 1-12)

4.4.2 Validity

According to Joppe, validity is how truthful a research is, and if it has really measured what it was supposed to measure. If your research answers different questions than it was supposed to answer than your research can be seen as invalid. This does not mean that the answers themselves are incorrect, nor outright not true, but rather that your findings are not applicable to your research, and thus your research becomes invalid. (Joppe, 2000)

Wainer and Braun claims that the validity of a research is based on how the research is constructed around the initial question that needed to be answered. If the original question goes unanswered then the research is invalid as it has missed it's point. (Wainer 1988, 19-30)

4.4.3 Thesis results

The research conducted in this thesis have been striving to provide both reliability and validity through-out its whole process. The theory has been thoroughly read and understood before added to this thesis, and the interview structure was created and reviewed by both the author and the thesis supervisor. During the interviews, all participants were regarded as equals and no special treatment was given. All answers were respected and taken into consideration for the analysis. The anonymity of the participants was ensured during the whole process. Any biases from the author was kept to an absolute minimum and the author made sure that all answers was answered in an objective fashion with the participants own opinions and experiences as a focus.

5   Results

The following chapter is dedicated to the results gathered from the interviews conducted. The interview questions will be included in the appendix. Each question has been analysed in-depth to get a better understanding of the interviewee group as a whole. The interviews were designed to make the interviewees open up about their experiences, and to make participants think about their answers. The results from the different questions will all include at least one direct quote from an interviewee. All interviews were conducted over phone or Skype, and were all recorded. The interviewer asked all questions in a similar manner, but with some follow-up questions were asked if the first answer was insufficient or without details.

The interview was divided into three sections, all of which will be analysed. The section not analysed only includes general information about the interviewee, such as name, age, occupation, and social status. Instead of the names of the interviewees, this report will use code to differentiate between different participants. The codes are A1-7.

Table 1. Overview of the participants of the interview. Gender remains undisclosed.

Code	Age	Social Status	Occupation
A1	40	Married	IT
A2	62	Married	Entrepreneur
A3	51	Domestic Partner	Architect
A4	30	Married	Student/Housewife
A5	31	Domestic Partner	Student/Events
A6	28	Married	Attorney
A7	34	Single	Researcher

5.1   Travel related questions

The first part to be analysed is the travel related questions. This part consists of three questions regarding frequency of leisure travel, what is considered when choosing a destination, and if sports event plays a role in the decision making. These questions include, but are not limited to, trips to ski-resorts and/or winter focused towns.

5.1.1 Travel Frequency

Each of the interviewees was asked how much they currently travel, excluding business travel, and what would make them travel more than they do today. On average, the interviewees travel around five times a year, this includes weekend trips and longer journeys. Some of excerpts from the interviews:

> "I try to travel at least once a month on shorter trips, longer trips usually happen twice year. I also like visiting nature reserves on weekends if I have time. But if I had time and money I'd travel even more, but you have to balance work and travel, so as long as I have to work I think I will keep my travelling amount similar to this"
> (A1, 2017)

> "My daughter lives in London so I go there a couple of times each year, and I used to own a house in Miami, and we still go to the states a lot. We also go skiing every year, usually to Austria but we have been in Sweden and in USA skiing some as well. If I had more time and less work then I'd definitely try to fit more travel into my schedule." (A3, 2017)

> "I travel at least 3 times per year. I was in England and Wales in June. But I'm quite lazy, so I don't travel as much as I could. I even have a lot of holiday days saved up at work, I just don't use them." (A7, 2017)

As these answers indicate the main reason to why people don't travel more is time. As the interviewees already travel a substantial amount, and money issues is just a minor nuisance to most people once in working life, one can deduct that travel is for the most part already a big part of life for the participants, with exception of A7 who could travel more than he already does.

5.1.2 Choosing destination

The interviewees were all asked on which are the most crucial parts for them when deciding on where to go for a skiing vacation. Unsurprisingly, all participants mentioned the quality of the snow and slopes as major contributors to the decision-making. The access to good restaurants was also something that was a common answer, though not universal.

> "For me the off-piste skiing is the most important part. But when I choose destination I have to take my wife into consideration who does not ski. This means that I only go

to places that offers good off-piste for me, and daily activities my wife can take part in while I'm in the slopes." (A1, 2017)

"I have been skiing for 55 years, so the skiing itself is the most important. I ski tele-mark-style, so it is also important that I get to do that. If I travel with my wife then the accommodation is very important as we like a nice hotel and good food when we travel together" (A2, 2017)

"There has to be guaranteed snow, and a lot of slopes. Finland lacks resorts that can provide that. I also want a proper ski centre where I can get my equipment fixed or polished if needed. I don't go out eating much, so I want to be able to cook in the accommodation I stay in, and affordability have also been of importance as I was a student until recently" (A5, 2017)

The answer indicates that even though the slopes are the most important, there are many other factors that comes into play as well. As there are many types of skiing tourist want to be sure that their way of skiing is tended to. People who go in pair, or larger groups, want the possibility to have alternative things to do outside the slopes as well, with the main focus on good accommodation that can provide experiences such as spa treatments, and good food.

5.1.3   Sports events

As sporting events attract a lot of tourists they are seen a good pull-factor for people to travel to certain destinations. Participants were asked about how likely it would be for them to travel to a destination for the sole purpose of attending such an event.

"We have been planning to go see golf tournaments, same with downhill competitions. We have already decided to go to Rider's Cup in 2022. We like places where we can combine different sports. For example, skiing in the morning and in the afternoon, we could play golf" (A3, 2017)

"Never been the main reason for my travels. I have been to both La Liga and Premier League games when I go the chance though. But that has just been a bonus, never the reason for travelling" (A5, 2017)

"I have never done a trip for the sole purpose of watching an event, but if there are sports events at the destination we travel to we love go to watch them. We have watched everything from Formula 1 to Baseball, Football, Horseback riding and even Big Air competitions." (A6, 2017)

There is clearly an interest in sporting events, which can be seen in the answers. However, this interest usually only stretches as far as being incidental in its nature. People rarely travel to a destination for the event itself, but rather attend events if they happen to happen at the same time as they visit the destination. This sporadic thinking about events make them volatile as a marketing tool as they can both go bang or bust.

5.2 Skiing related questions

The second part of the questions was about skiing and different experiences participants have gather through their skiing vacations. There is some focus on skiing in Sweden as a whole, but also what is important for the interviewees to have a pleasant time. Skiing vacations is more than just days in the slopes, so a question was asked about what activities skiers like to take part in outside the slopes.

5.2.1 Favourite Skiing vacation

To get a better understanding on what a perfect skiing vacation might look like, the participants had to go as in-depth as they could into their favourite skiing vacation they've had so far. This information can be used to create a skiing experience that not only is more enjoyable, but also pinpoint the most valuable experiences so they can be focused on in the future.

> "Mont Blanc in France was the best. They had the best snow, the best off-piste, and the best weather. It's also cheap, and they have great food. But when Åre is at its best, then it can compete with any ski-resort in the world" (A2, 2017)

> "I have had many great ones, so I can't decide on one but Åre is definitely a favourite. But I value good weather, and good company highly. Same goes for a lot of snow, powder even more so. It's nice to be able to get a tan while skiing, so the trips that have been able to provide that has all been my favourites" (A4, 2017)

> "We had supreme conditions in Japan, but my best memory is from Bulgaria. I was amazed how good it was for off-piste, and it was not that crowded. I also enjoyed my trips to Stryn in Norway because of the summer skiing" (A7, 2017)

As seen in the answers, Åre is mentioned often as a great destination, but isn't mentioned as the best experience the interviewees have had more than once. Mort participants seems to have enjoyed niche experiences that you don't come across that often, more than a solid, good experience.

5.2.2 Most important Experience

When looking for experiences, it's important to grasp what makes an experience easy to remember in a positive light. As seen in previous answers, snow conditions are highly valued. This question tried to understand what else is of high importance to get a good overall experience from the participants when on a vacation.

> "Skiing is by far the most important, the rest is just added bonuses which isn't of much importance. But if you travel with a big group then nice restaurants and shopping is of importance too." (A2, 2017)

> "The atmosphere is really important, it makes the whole experience. The slopes should be in good condition. A good nightlife is important, and there should be many different things to do. If you want to relax, party, or go for an adventure, they all must be available." (A4, 2017)

> "The social side is really important. I wouldn't travel alone. As I'm very athletic it is important that the slopes challenge me as much as possible. I always go to the after-ski, and then to a restaurant. Nightclubs, luxury shopping feel redundant to me" (A6, 2017)

The social aspect is of high importance according to many participants. Some might not be interested in going to pubs or nightclubs, but being able to spend time together is mentioned through-out the interviews. Shopping is also of some importance, even if some feel that shopping is unimportant to them. The more expensive type of shopping was seen as unnecessary amongst all but one interviewee.

5.2.3 Skiing in Sweden

All interviewees have been to Åre, and some have been to numerous places around Sweden for skiing purposes. This question was asked to get a clearer picture of how the participants have experienced their trips to Sweden. As almost every participant has vastly more experience from Åre than any other destination the following answer mainly focus on them.

> "I've been to Åre 3 times. I've been to Tärnaby and Hemavan as well. Åre was pretty okay. We stayed at Copperhill because we heard a lot about it. It was good, really nice ski-in and ski-out. It was a bit tricky to get to the better slopes though, and information about off-piste was hard to find. The slopes were in good shape, but it takes a long time to move around on Åreskutan. Everything was really expensive though,

and the transportation to Åre isn't the best so we had to take a taxi from the airport." (A1, 2017)

"I have been to Åre like 20 times growing up. It is a lot safer than the ski-resorts in Europe, so as kids you can ski alone from an early age without having to feel afraid. At the same time the skiing is way more challenging in Åre compared to Finnish slopes. This is good and the area is big enough to spend a week there and still find new things to do every day. It is also easy to communicate in Åre since everyone speaks English. Sometimes I even practise my Swedish when I go there" (A6, 2017)

"I have been in Vemdalen once, and Åre 4 times. I liked Vemdalen, it was small and cosy. Åre's rating goes between nice and awesome. SkiStar has been great to work with. I have organized bigger group trips a few times and SkiStar have always been very helpful and it has been a pleasant experience. When I tried to do the same to Bulgaria it turned out to be very difficult" (A7, 2017)

Åre gets overall good grades from participants, especially in terms of safety and how well organized the resort is. There is a lack of consistency between the interviewees how they feel the information and support from SkiStar is conducted. Some feel SkiStar is doing an amazing job in communicating with its clients while some have a more negative view, mainly about the information provided for certain services. One issue that is brought up more than once is how difficult it is to get to Åre as a destination. The lack of flights straight from Finland and the long drive from Stockholm is mentioned as problematic.

5.2.4   Recreational activities outside the slopes

As week-long holidays can wear a skier out, it is important that destination provide other services that skiers can take part in. This question was asked to get a better understanding of what is of importance during the days when skiing isn't on the table.

"Åre was very good because they had the swimming hall and good spas, but we rarely take a day off from skiing. But if the weather is bad then we shop, eat, and drink too much. Or go swimming or spa again" (A3, 2017)

"I like going to different spa-treatments, ice-swimming, to go the sauna, maybe some yoga too. And eating good food of course. If the kids aren't with us on the trip then we like a bit of partying too." (A4, 2017)

"We like sports shopping, so everything that has to do with sports, especially gadgets. Like GoPro and all that. We spend a lot of time climbing in the summer, so we'd like to go ice-climbing, but we haven't seen anywhere that offers it. We go to the

gym a lot, so we wouldn't stay in a hotel that doesn't have a gym you can use. Jogging is also important so we'd like a place that have good jogging routes after a day of skiing" (A6, 2017)

Many participants mentioned spa treatments and other well-being activities as their favourites when not in the slopes. Massage, sauna and swimming were all popular answers. But the thing everyone mentioned was the access to good food. Shopping is mentioned a moderate amount, but does not seem like a crucial part of what the participants want to do when taking a day off.

5.3   SkiStar related questions

As SkiStar is expanding, it seemed useful to gather information on what Finns think of Ski-Star as a brand, and more importantly what they think of SkiStar's destinations. Understanding if people look at the different SkiStar destination as benchmarks in the industry, or if they feel that something is lacking. There is also a question about brand awareness that delves deeper into the participants thoughts about how well SkiStar markets itself in Finland.

5.3.1   Visits to SkiStar resorts

This question was asked to dig deeper into which of the SkiStar resorts are the highest valued among the participants, but as many people have only been to Åre, the answer becomes a bit skewed towards talking about Åre. These answers were chosen because they gave the answers that was the least likely to repeat answers already given on previous questions.

> "I have been to Åre 3 times. I think the biggest issue with going to a SkiStar resort is their website. It is very confusing and has a lot of useless stuff on it. There were issues with localization and such which made the webpage into Swedish even if we chose English. In the end, we ended up booking everything from a different website." (A1, 2017)

> "I have been in Åre twice and Hemsedal twice. Hemsedal had better slopes and snow, but the prices in Norway are crazy, so Åre gets a plus point there. But if money wouldn't be a factor then Hemsedal would be my favourite." (A5, 2017)

> "I have been to Åre 4 times, Vemdalen 1 time, and Hemsedal 3 times. Åre is the biggest and have the most things to do. But if I have to choose which one I like best then I would say Hemsedal for its back-country skiing and ice-climbing" (A7, 2017)

It becomes clear from the answers that those who've been in Hemsedal consider the Norwegian town slightly better than they consider Åre. This isn't telling over the general consensus as Åre are mentioned over and over again as the best Sweden has to offer. Sälen is only mentioned once during the entire interview process, and it was mentioned as good, but subpar compared to Åre. A1 mentioned that his experience with the SkiStar website have been poor, and that he ended up not using it for its low functionality.

5.3.2 SkiStar resorts as benchmarks contra SkiStar resorts deficiencies

It is important to know what visitors think is world-class about a destination, and what they think is of low quality. This question was formulated in a way were the participants had to think of something that they felt was extremely good with the SkiStar destinations they have visited, but that they also had to think of something that wasn't as good.

> "Åre has always delivered a good service, good pistes, good lifts, great restaurants, and great hotels. Apart from the fact that Åre can get very crowded, I have nothing bad to say about it" (A2, 2017)

> "I would give Åre a 3.2/5 rating. It's better than the average ski-resort around the world. But it feels a bit too generic, almost like you are walking around on a parking lot all day. I'd like it better if it was cosier. But the food and the retail is great. Åre Bageri and the chocolate factory is some of the best things I've tasted in the world." (A3, 2017)

> "Both Åre and Hemsedal are great for snowboarders, especially the snowboard parks. It also feels very safe and everything works well. There is never any fear of the things breaking down. But the prices can be a bit high. But with that price you get a better service than you do in cheaper countries though" (A5, 2017)

Åre is mentioned a lot because of its good service, great restaurants and nightlife, and reliable equipment and safety. Every interviewee whose main use of the slopes are on snowboard mentions that there are no destinations they have visited that caters so well to snowboarders. What Åre gets some negative comments about is about how crowded it can get in peak season, and that Åre isn't as cosy as the alps. The price of going to Åre, and spending time there, is often mentioned as high to extremely high.

5.3.3 SkiStar as a brand in Finland

Knowing of where to go can make all the difference in when deciding a holiday trip. This question felt necessary to ask because of how little the Finnish public seem to know about SkiStar. The answer below tells a clear story of how the Finns view SkiStars marketing in the country.

> "SkiStar isn't known at all. I have been there and I barely remembered it. SkiStar should market itself better, maybe make package deals aimed at Finnish tourists. That would make Åre more attractive as a destination and it would make it easier in the terms of booking" (A3, 2017)

> "My friends wouldn't have any idea about SkiStar nor its locations. There is quite a lot of interest to have winter holidays among people in Finland, but everyone only knows about the Finnish resorts and the alps, so some marketing would do a lot I think" (A4, 2017)

> "I recognized Ski star as a brand and I associated it with Nordic skiing, but wouldn't be able to know more. We never mention SkiStar, only Åre as a town. Currently Åre is a bit too easy in term of skiing for me, as I am a very advanced skier. But if it would market a bit more advance stuff like heli-skiing or good off-piste it would attract me and my friends better. Åre is also a lot better than the alps when it comes to family stuff, so that makes it a prime contender for Finnish if they would know about it" (A6, 2017)

The closest to recognition SkiStar has was how A6 explained that she had a vague memory about it and that she thought of Nordic skiing when she heard it. No other interviewee remembers even seeing the name of SkiStar until reminded and they had no belief that the general public would have any idea of what SkiStar was. It is clear, however, that the interviewees believe that the Finnish people would find a lot of interest in the destinations SkiStar have on offer if there was a good marketing strategy planned out for Finland.

5.4 Discussion

The aim of this research was to understand why Finnish skiers have decreased their visits to Swedish ski-resorts. Over the last decade the Finnish market has shrunk for SkiStar, without any real indication on why that is. As skiing visits in general is on the rise throughout Sweden, SkiStar expected that the Finnish visits should grow together. However, this is not that case. The research gathered have shed some light on why that might be.

5.4.1 The Positive

The data collected shows that Finnish skiers have a positive look on skiing in Sweden, with a focus on Åre. According to most of the interviewees Åre is a world class destination that can compete with the famous destinations in the Alps and in the Rocky Mountains. The slopes are mentioned as varied and there are enough slopes to keep most skiers, of all skill levels, occupied for a long time.

Åre's gastronomical experiences are mentioned by all as some of the best in any ski resort in the world, and most people feel that the after-ski is superb. Snowboarders are particularly satisfied as SkiStar caters very well to snowboarders, something that is not seen in many destinations. Åre is seen as very safe, not only in the terms of it being low on crime, but also that all their equipment is working and that there is no worry that lifts and other heavy equipment will break down. Service, and accessibility of said service, is regarded highly in while in a SkiStar resort. Finns highly appreciate that they can communicate with everyone working in Åre in English, and if needed, Swedish.

5.4.2 The Negative

SkiStar's destinations are mentioned in every interview as very expensive, which deters many Finnish skiers, as one of the interviewee claimed, that he could spend a week in Austria for the same price as 1 weekend in Åre. The geographical location of Åre is something that is reoccurring in the interviews. The long-distance drive needed to reach Åre by car is seen as too time consuming. It is seen as problematic to go to Åre by flights as the nearest airport is well over an hour away from the destination, and transportation from the airport is seen as very limited.

SkiStar's website are mentioned as difficult to use and lacking useful information, especially for more advanced skiers that are looking for off-piste and back-country skiing. All participants believe that SkiStar as a brand is non-existent in the mind of the average Finn. Only one interviewee remembered SkiStar, and the rest mainly remember Åre as a city, detached from the SkiStar brand. Only one interviewee had even heard of Sälen, and a second one had heard of Vemdalen and that was because he had a friend who owned a cabin in Vemdalen. The participants all claimed that SkiStar have made a poor job marketing itself to Finns, but they all agreed that SkiStar have a lot to offer and that the Finnish market would listen and react if there were ready available information targeted to the Finnish market.

5.4.3 Suggestions

SkiStar is doing a world-class job in many sectors, and the Finns who have visited are largely happy with their trips, no matter if it's their first or 20th trip. However, there seems to be room to expand the marketing the company is doing in Finland, as barely the active skiers know about the different SkiStar destinations apart from Åre. Finland lack the geo-graphical landscape to provide bigger ski-resorts, but have a population who like taking part in winter related activities. Finns like to travel, so there is a market to be tapped.

SkiStar should try to focus their marketing on their strong points. As SkiStars location is mentioned as safe, both in the slopes, and in the towns, they can push extra hard to con-vey the message that its resorts are family friendly. The culinary experiences that are available in Åre is a big pull factor for Finns as well. Creating more Finnish focused pack-ages and marketing could potentially increase the amount of Finnish visitors as they are interested, but lack the knowledge, all the while being economically cautious, thus wanting high quality for a reasonable price.

According to many of the interviewees, SkiStar's homepage is too difficult to use. It's men-tioned that both the technical, such as miss-changing languages with geo-locating, and the information part of the homepage is not fully developed. SkiStar's should try to stream-line their homepage better so people enjoy using their home more, especially for people who don't speak Swedish.

According to Pine and Gilmore selling experiences through marketing requires that com-panies engage with its target audience in a memorable and personal way. This means that SkiStar must activate the Finnish consumer in a way that makes them stand out from its competitors, but also make them feel like they are personally valuable and appreciated by SkiStar. Figure 4 summarises the recommendations to the commissioner of the thesis. (Pine&Gilmore 2002)

Figure 4. Summary of suggestions

6   Conclusion

This last chapter will be dedicated to how the research went from start to finish, but also how the authors own experiences played out during the writing of this thesis.

6.1   Research

The research conducted in this thesis was something the author was quite worried about in the beginning, as he felt it wouldn't lead to anything. But the longer into the writing process he got the more confident he became that this thesis will prove useful for both himself, and the commissioner. The theory was carefully chosen to fit the narrative of the topic, and the aim of the thesis. Getting a greater understanding of sports tourism, ski tourism, tourism experiences, and also about SkiStar as a company turned out to be valuable as it made the interview questions better, and thus making the answers better as well.

The results from the interviews were positive on the most part for the commissioner. Finnish ski tourist view Åre as a world-class ski resort and that they always enjoyed their time there. The service, the gastronomical experiences, and the safety gets admiration from almost all interviewees, and the ones using snowboard claim there are no other ski resort in Europe that can challenge SkiStar's destinations. However, not everything is perfect, no matter how hard you strive for it. The apparent lack of information and marketing towards the Finnish market is a big issue for SkiStar, as most participants answered that they never hear or see anything about the company, nor its resorts while in Finland. The author visited GoExpo Winter 2017 in Helsinki in the first days of December, and while all major Finnish ski resorts were present, together with a large number of other winter and ski related companies, SkiStar was missing. This is something SkiStar will have deal with if they want to gain back the Finnish visitors to Swedish slopes.

6.2   Writing process

First point of contact with the company was in late May. After a series emails, a phone-meeting was established between the author, and the contact person from SkiStar, Björn Broström. Björn's role at SkiStar is Market and Sales Manager. During the meeting, it was discussed what type of research SkiStar was interested in, and the main interest was the Finnish market. It has become apparent to SkiStar that they have had fewer Finnish visitors the last few years than earlier years, and they wanted to see if there was an as apparently reason for that.

This was brought up on the first meeting between the author and the thesis coordinator, and together they started to make a plan of how the coming months should be proceeded and what to do next. The plan started with what theory would be useful for a thesis of this sort and where to find said theory.

After a few weeks of developing the theory, the author moved on to creating the interview under the supervision of the thesis coordinator. As the author have designed many interviews in the past, this process proceeded rather quickly. As soon as the interview was finished, the author started to look for potential participants. To find these the author used different online channels, and soon eight interviews was lined up, and over the coming three weeks the author conducted seven interviews, with one participant having to cancel.

The last weekend in October the author attended a thesis camp at the campus he has studied at for 3.5 years, and during that day most of the analysis was completed together with the methodology. This was a highly useful day, and now the author could start to imagine the end of the thesis, which the development of started slowly but surely the weeks to come.

The first half of November was mainly spent correcting mistakes, and ensuring the thesis was structured correctly and contained the correct information. Making sure the aim of the thesis was followed throughout was a major part of the finishing of the project. The thesis was completed in the end of November.

6.3   Reflection

As this thesis runs to its end, it has become clear to the author that writing it had far greater impact on him than he thought it would have. Being able to write extensive amounts of text in a short period of time can seem daunting, but once it is done the feeling that something good was accomplished is so much greater than expected.

Writing this thesis was challenging for the author, especially in the start, but the outcome turned out to be positive, and the author is satisfied with the results. Not everything went perfect during the process, such as one less interview than planned, having to rewrite certain parts of the thesis, and the general time management was all things that could be improved on. The author definitely learnt a lot over the time it took writing it, not only about how to write a thesis, but also how much he could push himself to write even if it didn't seem very appealing at the time.

When there are negative things to say, there are usually positives things to say as well. The author was particularly satisfied with the outcome of the interviews, and also the quality answer he received from the participants. The author has always liked talking to new and interesting people, and the interviews proved to be a good time from start to finish. Another thing the author felt was highly successful was the communication between him and the thesis supervisor, whom he'd like to thank personally for all the support given along the writing of this thesis. Not only did she provide good information and structure, but also a fair share of motivation. This thesis has been a good ending to a fruitful time as a student in Haaga-Helia UAS.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Basic Information:
1. Name
2. Age
3. Social Status
4. Occupation

Travelling related questions
1. How often do you travel for leisure, and when did you do it last? What would make you travel more than you do today?
2. What is the most important thing when choosing destination for a skiing vacation for you?
3. Do you ever travel for spectative (watching sports events or similar) reasons, or just for participative reasons? Any example of spectative travels?

Skiing related questions
1. Describe your best skiing vacation.
2. What experiences are the most important to you while on a skiing vacation?
3. Tell me about you skiing vacations in Sweden, and how many times you've been skiing in Sweden.
4. What type of recreational activities do you take part in outside the ski-slopes?

SkiStar related questions
1. How many times have you visited SkiStar's resorts? Have you been to many different ones, and if so, which was your favourite and why?
2. How did you enjoy their resorts? Was there anything you thought was extra good, or something you thought was less good? (prices, slopes, service quality etc.)
3. Do you feel SkiStar have any brand presence in Finland? What would make people more interested in going to Sweden for winter holiday?