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# Improving Corporate Brand Management to Increase Attractiveness of Professional Sports Clubs

Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences

Master's Degree

Programme in Business Informatics

Master's Thesis

1 May 2020

This thesis work has made me view the sport of Alpine skiing from a completely new perspective – one I have not had the time or interest to acknowledge as a professional athlete, but one I have immensely grown to appreciate as a coach and a member of various sports club management teams.

I wholeheartedly thank You (Jaana, Jakke, Mika, Luka, Tommi, Pia, Ivan R., Ivan D., Massimo, Roberto) for Your intellectual input and support, and above all - the immense resource of patience during what was a lengthy research and writing process.

In my discussions with some of you, a prevailing thought was the fact that professional sports clubs have so much to learn and adopt from the corporate business world. At the same time - sports values, principles and competitive hard-work ethics will always be there to remind the business world how fights can be fought in a fair and honorable way.

This increasing interdependency between sports and organizational management, together with Your guidance, input and ideas, has made me even more intrigued by the future of Alpine skiing and clubs' modern strategies for growing this sport's popularity and attracting future generations to the ski slopes.

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May 1, 2020

Author Title Number of Pages Date	Danko Marinelli Improving Corporate Brand Management to Increase Attractiveness of Professional Sports Clubs 66 pages + 1 appendix 3 May 2020
Degree	Master's Degree
Degree Programme	Programme in Business Informatics
Instructors	Dr. Thomas Rohweder, Principal lecturer Zinaida Grabovskaia, PhL, Senior Lecturer
<p>Since mid 2000s, Alpine skiing professional have pointed to the lack of appropriate branding practices among professional sports clubs, while simultaneously identifying corporate brands as a 'hot topic'. This Thesis explores the challenges of brand management within professional sports clubs of Alpine skiers. The purpose of this study is to propose improvements to the corporate branding practices of sports clubs contributing towards attractiveness to young athletes.</p> <p>To this end, this Thesis defines the concept of corporate branding in the context of sports clubs. Next, this Thesis examines corporate brand management practices on the example of four Alpine ski clubs in Finland. To understand the relationship between corporate branding and its effects on being attractive to young elite skiers, this study explores the experiences and views of four clubs' representatives, all from middle or top management who are all closely engaged with the development of young athletes. This is achieved through the usage of in-depth interviews with a number of key stakeholders.</p> <p>Results of the study show that corporate branding practices have a significant impact on the attractiveness, especially on the young athlete's likelihood of staying in the sport. However, implementation of corporate branding strategies and relevant daily practices remains predominantly overlooked by the studied Alpine ski clubs in Finland.</p> <p>Results outline several improvement suggestions related to the role of personal traits and servicescape for the corporate brand, that could result in the increased attractiveness of the sport overall, as well as that of the sports club for young athletes. For comparison, the study also involved the interviews with their peers in Italy for validation of the results.</p>	
Keywords	Alpine skiing, corporate branding, sports club, young athletes

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## 1 Introduction

Alpine skiing is a popular sport in many countries. The extreme environment of cold, altitude, and movement complexity make ski racing a difficult sport to pursue.

Many sportsmen have suggested that the multifaceted nature of the sport is the most relevant factor of its attractiveness. The technical complexity of ski racing means that 'time on the snow' is paramount to athlete development. For a young skier who is heading toward a professional level, "time on the snow" will basically decide on their professional future. Before they become professional, young athletes need to invest several years in training and competition in order to achieve the elite level in sport. Hence it is important to study various aspects of managing the experiences of young athletes and various factors that influence their decision to stay in sport.

This Thesis takes a special interest into a particular concept – corporate branding of Sports clubs – and its influence on attractiveness of sports clubs to young elite skiers.

### 1.1 Business Challenge

Results from recent skiing competitions show that Finnish skiers have enjoyed a great deal of success in international arena. Yet, there has been a visible decline in number of young skiers deciding to professionally dedicate themselves to the sport. But what influences this drop rate, and where are the roots to this issue? And what may cause them to drop out of the sport? Why the clubs are not attractive enough to retain young skiers?

Management of sports clubs is relevant, since sports clubs rely on the high-performing staff and trainers, strong pool of volunteers, and attractive facilities to help them attract young athletes. In other words, they try to improve attractiveness through a better *corporate brand*. Thus, the Thesis aims to discuss if attractiveness of sport club can be influenced via better corporate branding, especially attractiveness for young athletes.

## 1.2 Objective of the Thesis

This Thesis looks into the influence of corporate branding on attractiveness of sports clubs for young skiers. To explore it, this Thesis will analyse how selected corporate branding elements influence the attractiveness of Finnish Alpine sports organizations based on the interviews with the key stakeholders of selected sports clubs.

While some argue sports clubs differ significantly from other organizations and firms, this Thesis draws a close line between sports clubs and business organizations. This approach is used to decide how sports organizations can be structured and designed, and why some are attractive while others are not. Since the researcher of this Thesis has practical knowledge of how Finnish downhill ski clubs manage their corporate brands, it was interesting to look into how these organizational practices affect attractiveness of sports clubs.

Accordingly, the objective of this Thesis is *to propose improvements to corporate branding practices of Sports Clubs for making them more attractive to young athletes.*

This is achieved based on studying and using theoretical frameworks for understanding corporate branding; including that of Schultz et al. (2005) and Balmer et al. (2017), which forms the foundation for corporate branding by linking strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate images. Also, this study applies the approach by Balmer et al. (2017) on corporate personality traits, as well that of Pritchard and Stinson (2014) and Swartz, Iacobucci (2000) focusing in the influence of servicescape. The practical part looks into the situation of 4 sports organizations working with young athletes, as well as sought external opinions for validation of the proposal from the Italian peers.

## 1.3 Structure of Thesis

This Thesis starts by discussing the elements of corporate branding and their role in improving attractiveness of sports clubs, so that to retain young athlete talents.

This study is limited to four Finnish Alpine ski clubs and schools, and to corporate branding practices are examined for improvement within these organizations. This implies the study will not necessarily apply to other kinds of sports clubs.

The Thesis is structured in the following way. The first section of the study, *Introduction*, provides an introduction to the topic. Next, *Method and Material* shows the applied methodology for conducting this thesis. Next, *Literature and Best Practice on Corporate Branding* focuses on defining a sports club as an organization and looking into the elements of corporate brandings that can influence a club's attractiveness. Current state analysis is performed on 4 sports organizations, where special focus is placed on their corporate branding practices; and the results of CSA are discussed in Section 4. This is followed by the *Proposal* section, which offers improvement suggestions for corporate branding practices of Finnish Alpine ski clubs. It is followed by *Conclusions* which also include recommendations for further steps.



## 2 Method and Material

This section discusses the research approach, data collection and data analysis used for fulfilling the Thesis objective.

### 2.1 Research Approach

To examine branding practices in sports clubs means to seek to understand natural phenomena in their natural contexts. This speaks to the use of qualitative research which is more open to inquiry of ideas (Tucker, Powel, Meyer, 1995) which typically rely on the use of interview technique and other qualitative data methods.

Qualitative methods are typically applied for three major purposes for research: to (1) explain, (2) describe or (3) explore the phenomenon of interest; and synonyms for these terms could include to (1) understand, to (2) develop, or to (3) discover (Marshall, Rossman, 1989: 21). This study is also exploratory in nature and seeks to explore influence of corporate branding on the attractiveness of sports clubs.

Interviewing is a key method of data collection for a qualitative study. In qualitative interviews, interviewees take the topic and develop it, allowing the interview also to explore the unexpected topics (Patton 2015). This is important element which contributed to interviews becoming the specific choice of data collection on the topic.

Patton (2015) says that the purpose of interviewing is to allow to enter into other person's perspective; thus it is best suited to research questions of descriptive or exploratory type (i.e. questions that focus on *what* and *how*).

Guion, Diehl, McDonland (2011) identify these key characteristics of in-depth interviews: open-ended questions; semi-structured format; seeking understanding and interpretation; and recording responses. This is in contrast to usage of, for instance, survey method which tends to be more quantitative and is conducted for a larger numbers of people. Guion, Diehl, McDonland (2011) describe seven stages of conducting in-depth interviews: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and reporting. Generally speaking, the semi-structured in-depth interview is similar to a con-

versation in that there are two individuals discussing a topic of mutual interest in a flexible and free-flowing manner.

## 2.2 Research Design

This Thesis was conducted in several steps. The thesis process started with a business challenge (research problem) and continued to selecting and defining the objective. Here, it was established that this Thesis will seek to improve the current corporate branding practices and propose how sports organizations can improve their corporate branding activities for becoming more attractive for young athletes.

Next step was a Literature review that focused on the interest areas within corporate branding, and yielded best practice and existing knowledge necessary to, first, explore the current state and, second, design the improvement proposal.

Following this, two data collection rounds occurred. With the first data collection round, four different respondents - representing four different Alpine ski organizations – provided insights into the current state of Alpine ski clubs, schools and their Corporate Branding practices and other related topics, such as talent management. Results of this data collection served to identify key weaknesses, which were tackled with the second data collection round.

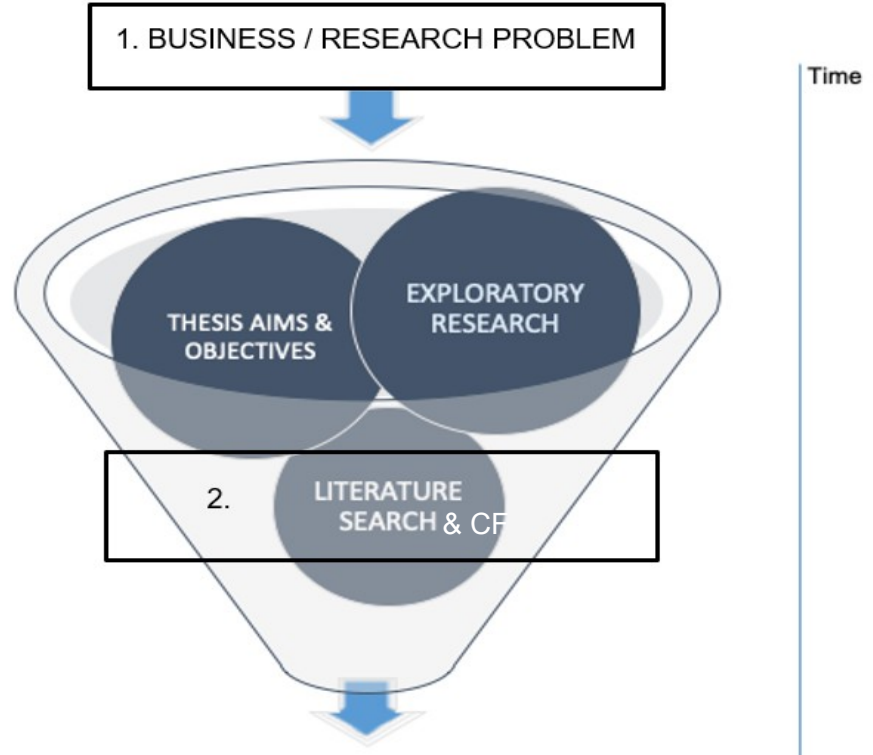
In the second data collection round, selected stakeholders from the same four clubs in Finland formulated key proposals for improvements of the afore-mentioned weaknesses.

Their insights were later validated with the top management of the other, similar Alpine skiing clubs where the researcher could gain access to, in Italy (Data 3).

Critical stages of this research design included: (1) choosing the elements of the Conceptual framework (CF) at the end of literature search on Alpine skiing and corporate branding; (2) selecting participants for the Current state analysis (CSA) – a decision driven by a combination of factors ranging from the study objectives to available sports management informants. Additionally, (3) the Proposal for improvement conducted after the current state analysis needed to link directly to the key weaknesses. Another

critical stage was (4) conducting the data collection for Proposal building and finally Validation.

Figure 1 below is a visual representation of this research design.



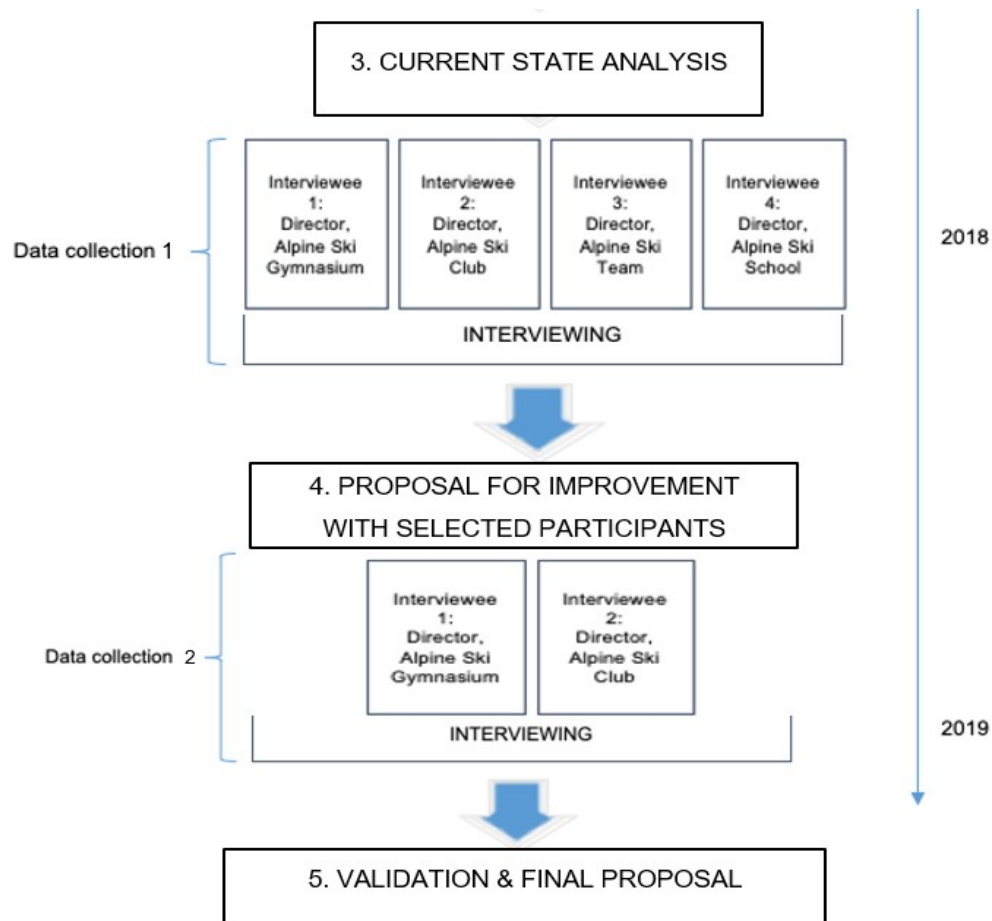


Figure 1: Research design of this study.

The data collection process is described in the following section.

### 2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This study used semi-structured interviews. Data collection was conducted on four sports clubs (Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools), where special focus was placed on their corporate branding practices. Interviews were prepared using a list of questions as well as several topics, to serve as an interview guide. The list of interview questions can be found from Appendix 1.

The interviews were conducted in spring and autumn of 2018, as well as summer of 2019. Two interviews were done in ski resort locations. The other two interviews were telephone interviews, done so due to logistical constraints. While such interviews may have helped some participants when discussing sensitive topics, it was clear that these interviews lacked face-to-face contact.

The study selected representatives of four sports organizations, mid-to-high executives within top-performing Alpine ski organizations in Finland. All were selected based on their willingness to participate, their knowledge on the subjected matter, and their fluency in English language. The anonymity of the interviewees was maintained, so that the information shared would remain anonymous.

Table 1 presents the overview data collections for this study.

Table 1. Details of interviews in Data 1-3

STAGE	PARTICIPANTS	DATA TYPE	TOPIC, DESCRIPTION	DATE, LENGTH	DOCU- MENTED AS
<b>Data 1, for the Current State Analysis (Section 4)</b>					
1.	<b>Respondent 1:</b> Director, Alpine Ski School	Face-to-face interview	Interview about current processes based on the respondent's experiences and knowledge.	April 2018, 1 hour; June 2019, 30 minutes	Interview notes, audio recorder
2.	<b>Respondent 2:</b> Director, Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium	Face-to-face interview	Interview about current processes based on the respondent's experiences and knowledge.	April 2018, 90 minutes; June 2019, 30 minutes	Interview notes, audio recorder
3.	<b>Respondent 3:</b> Director, Alpine Ski Club	Telephone interview	Interview about current processes based on the respondent's experiences and knowledge.	April 2018, 1 hour; June 2019, 30 minutes	Interview notes
4.	<b>Respondent 4:</b> Alpine Ski Team	Telephone interview	Interview about current processes based on the respondent's experiences and knowledge.	September 2018, 40min; June 2019, 30 minutes	Interview notes
<b>Data 2, for Proposal building (Section 5)</b>					
5.	<b>Respondent 1:</b> Director, Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium	Telephone interview	Participants were involved in proposal building, offered suggestions for the proposal building (i.e. what they suggest should be improved, especially in the current <i>branding practices</i> . Feedback and summary on these proposals were discussed.	August 2019, 30 minutes	Interview notes
6.	<b>Respondent 2:</b> Director, Alpine Ski Club	Telephone interview		August 2019, 30 minutes	Interview notes
7.	<b>Interviewee 1:</b> Coach of the National team	Skype interview	Participants were actively involved in proposal building, offered suggestions for the proposal building (i.e. what they suggest should be improved in the current branding practices, especially within (a) <i>Personal Traits</i> and (b) <i>Servicescape</i> . Feedback and summary on these proposals were discussed.	March 2020, 1 h 30 minutes	Interview notes
8.	<b>Interviewee 2:</b> Head coach of the Club	Skype interview		March 2020, 1 h 30 minutes	Interview notes
<b>Data 3, for Proposal validation (Section 6)</b>					
9.	<b>Interviewees 1&amp;2:</b> <b>Finland</b>	Telephone interview	Participant gave suggestions on the usefulness & relevance of the Proposal (i.e. what they suggest should be improved in the current Proposal for improving branding practices, especially within (a) <i>Personal Traits</i> and (b) <i>Servicescape</i> )	August 2019, 30 min each	Interview notes
10.	<b>Interviewees 1&amp;2:</b> <b>Italy</b>	Skype interview		April 2020, 1 h each	Interview notes

As seen from Table 1, data for this thesis was collected in three rounds. The first round of data collection was conducted for the Current state analysis. Here, due to my shared history and acquaintance with the respondents I planned for the type of interaction in which I, as the interviewer, could allow the interviewees a good deal of leeway, to ensure they would tell the story in their own words. Moreover, my aim was to engage in detailed yet opened discussions with the interviewees, which would uncover their views and possibly new and unforeseen topics. Hence, conducted interviews followed a *semi-structured interview* methods based on a specific list of questions. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes.

The second round of data collection, Data 2 was collected to gather suggestions for developing the draft of the initial Proposal. This data collection was conducted using telephone interviews, done so due to logistical constraints in arranging face-to-face interview sessions. Only two respondents were available for this collection round. It offered suggestions on what should be improved in the current branding practices of Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools, especially in the context of (a) Personal Traits and (b) Servicescape concepts of Corporate Branding. Simultaneously, feedback and summary on these proposals were discussed with the interviewees.

The third round of data collection, Data 3 was collected to finalize the Proposal based on final feedbacks and comments on the initial Proposal.

## 2.4 Validity and Reliability

According to Moisander, Valtonen (2006:23), research is conventionally evaluated in terms of three basic criteria: reliability, validity and rigour.

Reliability and validity refer to the quality and truthfulness of findings and research procedures (Altheide& Johnson, 1994 in: Whitemore et al. 523:2001). This thesis may be questioned by the questions such as "*How can these criteria be assured?*". Another question may be, "*Can this study can be replicated?*". Theory suggests that qualitative interviews are impossible to replicate, since they are a social interaction with many elements coming into play. Therefore, interpretation of answers by the interviewees should reflect the meanings and experiences as perceived by these interviewees (Sandelowski, 1986 in: Whitemore et al. 530:2001) based on their experiences, following the principles of qualitative research. Another question which may be posed is, "*How*

*objective and accurate are the conclusions?*". This study addresses possible biases of authenticity and integrity by careful selection of respondents with expertise and personally known as reliable to the researcher of this thesis.



### 3 Literature and Best Practice on Corporate Branding Management and Its Elements Influencing in Sports

This section explores previous research on corporate branding management, especially for professional Alpine skiing and its sports organizations. First section is focused on examining the corporate branding. The second section touches on the profile of an Alpine skier, and the elements that can influence attractiveness of Sports clubs for young Alpine skiers. This section concludes with a conceptual framework of this study.

#### 3.1 Corporate Branding in Sport

Some would argue *sport* has an ambiguous history when viewed from a *management* perspective (Dolles, Söderman, 2013:526). However, practice shows that many divisions between sports and management have blurred over the last time due to sport's *corporatization*.

In fact, sport always had links to business, and the intensity of these links increased considerably over the last decades. Practice shows that sport organizations over the last years have become more professionally structured and managed. Many have applied business principles to marketing their products, planning their operations, managing their human resource and other aspects of organizational activity. Thus, there is a great deal of similarities between business and sport:

Sport and business share a common concern for value creation, branding, finding new sources of revenue, product innovation and market expansion. (Dolles, Söderman, 2013:725)

Thus, applicability of corporate branding practices to sports clubs should not be doubted. Literature on corporate branding proves its applicability to all types of enterprises, ranging from the multi-national corporation to the small, family, business (Balmer et al, 2017:28).

##### 3.1.1 Corporate Branding: Definitions and Myths

What is a brand? Among numerous definitions, Miletsky and Smith (2009:2) see a brand as the sum of total of all user experiences with a particular product of service, which builds both reputation and future expectations of benefit. This points to the importance of brand management in order to achieve desired effects in the eyes of the audience or customers.

Corporate branding differs from product branding in several respects – and branding effort range from the product to the corporation (Schultz et al. 2005). Specifically, product brands mainly target customers. Corporate brands contribute to the images formed and held by organisational and community members, investors, partners, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

Schultz et al (26: 2005) define a *Corporate brand* as a sum of Product/Service, emotions, and socio-cultural significance. This implies that a corporate brand can influenced by many factors: social responsibility of an organization, its involvement with the community, as well as the organization's cultural and heritage, societal importance, significant symbols, etc.

Definition by Schultz et al. (2005:12) is used in this study:

“*Corporate branding* represents a relatively simple idea, that the organization and everything it stands for is mobilized to interact with the stakeholders the organization wants to reach and engage them in dialogue”.

The emphasis on the organization-stakeholder relationship is strong across studies on corporate branding – this is the *people dimension*, as Schultz et al (2005:18) call it.

Balmer et al. (2017) see corporate branding being supported by corporate identity, corporate communication, corporate image, and corporate reputation – all of which are characterized by a strong relationship with internal and external stakeholders. In practice, this means that besides strong relationship-building traits, a strong corporate brand needs the involvement of the *top management* team as it requires the engagement of all employees (Balmer et al., 2017:13).

If done successfully, multiple benefits are associated with corporate brands. Balmer et al. (2017:75) refer to research undertaken by MORI (the British opinion research consultancy) among senior managers, which found that a corporate brand had a perceived value in terms of increased profile, customer attractiveness, product support, visual re-

cognition, investor confidence, as well as encapsulating organisational values and providing employee motivation.

Yet, is corporate branding sufficiently recognized? Even today, we could still argue that in many cases - particularly in the context of small organizations such as sports clubs - the perception of corporate branding is locked into so-called *Corporate Branding Myths* identified by Schultz et al. (2005:12). They are indicated in Figure 2 below.

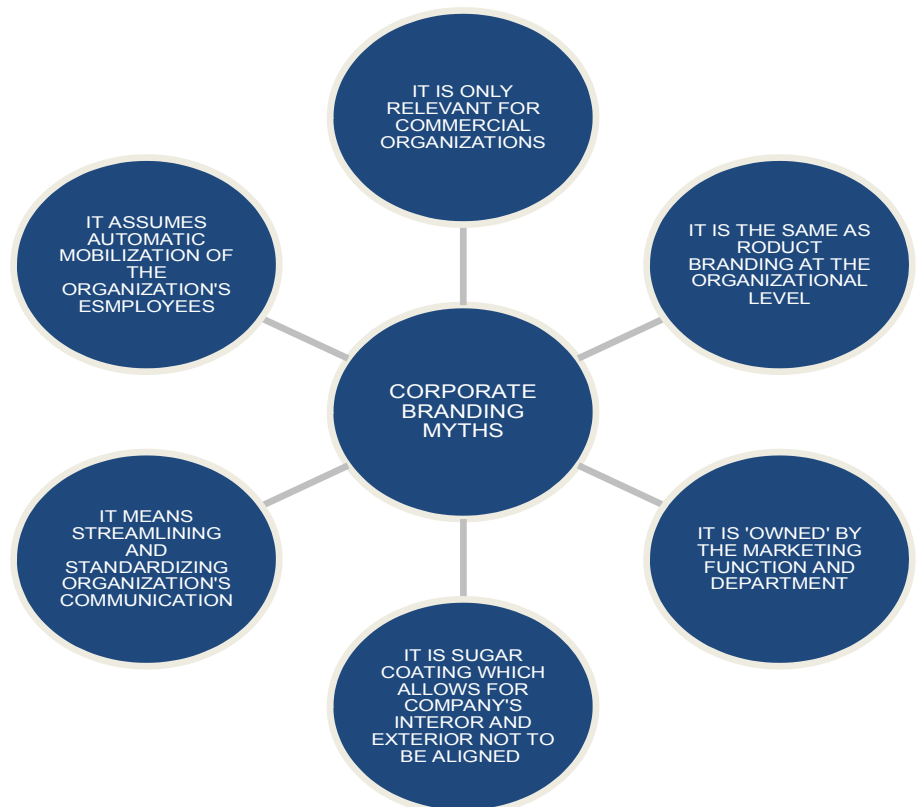


Figure 1: Corporate Branding Myths (Schultz et al. 2005:13).

These myths, as Schultz et al. (2005) argue, prevent organizations from creating effective corporate brands. Therefore, to avoid slipping into corporate branding myths, an organization needs to place efforts to project its own company's distinctiveness by using the total corporate communication mix to impress external audiences. As a result of these efforts, the audience will be encouraged to perceive and judge the company and its offerings as *attractive* (Schultz et al. 2005).

When it works well, corporate branding manages to express the values that attract stakeholders to the organisation and encourage them to feel *a sense of belonging* to it (Schultz et al. 2005).

To summarize, corporate branding relies not only on internal development, but also includes external stakeholders, as central players in the branding process, i.e. customers, suppliers, media, government and non-government agencies, sponsors, etc.

In the context of sports clubs and Alpine ski clubs alike, this means a strong and continuous interaction between club management and involved stakeholders (among others, with fans, athletes and their parents). These interactions provide the company with feedback about how the company is *perceived* by others.

### 3.2 Corporate Branding: Personality Traits

Corporate brand has a greater breadth and depth than marketing (Balmer, 2017:37), and so a traditional marketing department within an organization may not be sufficient to successfully implement a corporate brand strategy. Schultz et al. (2005:128) argue that corporate branding strategy moves branding beyond marketing department and beyond the marketing discipline. How should an organization even begin corporate brand strategy? This question leads us to the concept of *corporate brand personality*.

Balmer et al. (2017:46, 48) suggest that identity of any organization is defined by its *corporate brand personality*. The corporate brand personality reflects all values, words and actions of all employees. Here, employees are at the heart of corporate brand personality definition. They have powerful impact on consumers' perceptions of the brand and the organisation.

All employees must be able to articulate the corporate brand personality - something which is done through concept of *Corporate personality traits*. Corporate personality traits are grouped into three dimensions related to *the 'heart,' the 'mind' and the 'body'*, as presented in Figure 3 (Balmer et al. 2017:49).

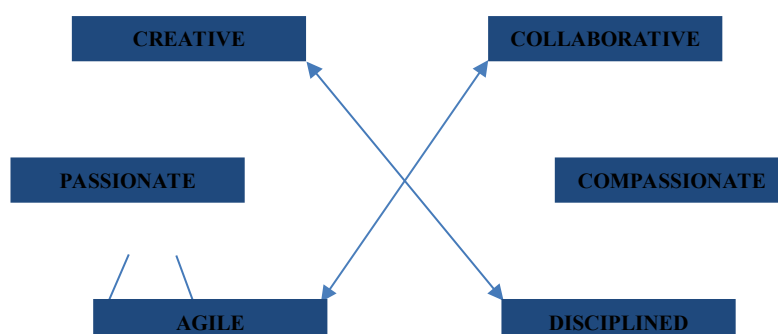




Figure 3: Corporate Personality Traits (Blamer et al., 2017:50).

As seen from Figure 3, in Corporate personality traits, *the 'heart'* of the company dictates that the company is passionate about serving its customers, while having compassion for employees, stakeholders, and members of the communities in which it operates.

Next, *the 'mind'* points to creative yet consistent approach to serving customers; and *the 'body'* of the company seeks to achieve agility as well as a collaborative approach that ensures working towards common goals.

Keller and Richey argue that, through the 'heart-mind-body' framework the company is articulating its corporate brand personality, but it is also offering a guideline for establishing a certain culture within an organization. This culture is characterized by employees who *live the brand* and are close to their customers and form a creative and agile yet disciplined organisational environment. (Blamer et al., 2017:50)

A unique feature of sport organizations is that they evaluate performance differently than traditional business organizations (Hoye et al., 2009:4). Private or publicly listed companies exist to make profits and increase wealth of shareholders or owners, whereas in sport, other imperatives such as winning championships, are important to stakeholders and members, or meeting community service obligations may take precedence over financial outcomes. Therefore, the 'heart-mind-body' approach to corporate branding seems even more important as it communicates the values of the organization.

Summing up, these dimensions reflect the three sets of personality traits that can guide employees in the organisation and influence how the company will be viewed by others.

### 3.3 Servicescape in Corporate Branding

The following section introduces the concept of Servicescape in the context of sports organizations.

#### 3.3.1 Definition of Servicescape

The concept of *servicescape* comes from environmental psychology – a mixture of psychology, sociology, architecture and design, social geography and urban studies (Swartz, Iacobucci, 2000:41). It is also related to customer experiences that has a significant role in differentiating one organization from another (Swartz, Iacobucci 2000:37).

Swartz, Iacobucci (2000:37) defines servicescape as *the built environment* surrounding a service delivery, and also distinguishes a *social environment* of service delivery to it. This term relates to the influence of *tangible* and *intangible* cues on customers.

Pritchard, Stinson (2014) expand this definition by defining the role of servicescape in sports branding. Their main message is that *physical environment* communicates an image of what is included in service experience, and can therefore be used *to differentiate* from its competitors, and result *in loyal brand behaviour* by customers.

Pritchard, Stinson (2014) define the following elements in the servicescape:

“Servicescape... is essentially everything that is physically present about an individual during the service encounter – to which a consumer is exposed during a service encounter; typically including (1) ambient factors, (2) design factors, and (3) social factors”. (Pritchard, Stinson, 2014:145)

This definition of servicescape reveals contains major components that make up the servicescape:

Firstly, *ambient factors*, which are the non-visual, background conditions in the service environment, and tend to impact the subconscious. They exist below consumer’s immediate awareness and include factors such as *lighting, temperature, music, scent,*

*and cleanliness*. These factors affect the emotional state of a person, and therefore influence their behaviour.

Secondly, *design factors* that represent environmental elements which are more visual than ambient factors. They can be functional (layout, comfort, privacy) and aesthetic (architecture, colour, materials, style).

Thirdly, *social factors* which are stimuli (things) related to *people* that are present during a service encounter. Pritchard, Stinson (2014) see the presence of other people, their type, character, ethnicity; behaviour of customers and employees to all be included in social factors.

Swartz, Iacobucci (2000) also specifically points that servicescape should also include *employees*:

“Because services generally are purchased and consumed simultaneously, and typically require direct human contact, customers and employees interact with each other within the organization's physical facility. Ideally, therefore, the organization's environment should support the needs and preferences of both service employees and customers simultaneously”. (Swartz, Iacobucci 2000:58)

This presence of *other humans in co-creation* of service delivery is very much in line with the work of Schultz et al. (32: 2005). They suggest that, in the context of corporate branding, companies should build relationships that are driven by the creation of *joint experiences* with consumers, events, or interactive dialogue, hence actively engaging consumers as co-creators of the brand.

Summing up, the definition of servicescape selected in this Thesis relies on Pritchard, Stinson (2014) explanation that servicescape as a form of communication that creates *cues* for customers (via building the physical, emotion and social environment). The summary contains the following scope of servicescape: (1) *physical environment*; (2) attempt to produce *specific emotional effects* on buyers; (3) *the non-built environment*. Pritchard, Stinson (2014) conclude by stating that servicescape includes *everything that is observable* by the consumer when he or she is present at a specific service location. Most importantly, the servicescape can be used by organizations as a *differentiator* to differentiate the organization from its competitors (Pritchard, Stinson, 2014:148).

### 3.3.2 Servicescape and Physical Environment

When considering the service delivery and the environment in which they take place (Swartz, Iacobucci, 2000:46) recognizes three key questions: (1) what part of the servicescape can be controlled?; (2) what part must be understood?; and (3) what are the desired outcomes? These three questions form the Framework for managing the servicescape for managers, presented in Figure 5 below.

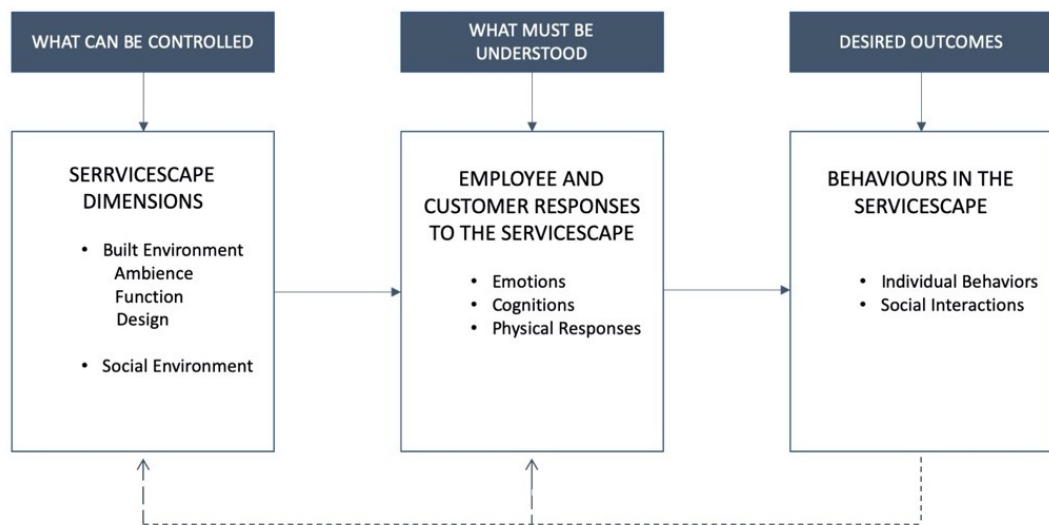


Figure 5. The Servicescape: An Integrated Framework for Managers (Swartz, Iacobucci, 2000:46).

This servicescape framework suggests that execution of servicescape dimensions needs to be *planned*, as they have as strong marketing impact as any other marketing variable. Similarly, it means that service providers need to create a servicescape that will meet the target customers' needs, wants, and expectations.

In this process, looking at Figure 5, certain servicescape dimensions can be controlled. It especially relates to *the Build environment*. Such as designing the ambience, creating a functional layout, as well as elements of design. Social environment, argues (Swartz, Iacobucci, 2000:46) is not as easily controlled as the physical environment.

### 3.3.3 Servicescape and Social Environment



As shown in Figure 5, the servicescape involves *customer and employee responses*, which includes understanding their *emotional* state, among others. Similarly, research such that Schultz et al. (26, 2005) place emotion as a centre-block of corporate brand definition. In fact, *emotion* is one component of servicescape which is particularly important in the context of corporate branding of sports clubs. (Pritchard, Stinson, 2014:150) suggests the more emotional arousal the servicescape creates in the consumer, the more likely the consumer will engage in loyal customer behaviours such as positive word-of-mouth communications. Similarly, Balmer (2017:35) asserted the real value of corporate brands is to be found in *the emotional ownership* of brands by individuals both outside (fans or customers) and inside (employees) the organisation.

In the context of sports clubs, fans are those typically associated with emotions. Hightower et al. states that emotions help shape and significantly influence their *behaviour*, such as presence or lack of support towards a sports club, team, or athlete. This is important, since in a world where products and services are rapidly imitated, emotional attachment to the corporate brand would emerge as a key asset that gives organizations a competitive advantage (Balmer et al. 2017:32).

The final component of the servicescape framework (Swartz, Iacobucci, 2000:47) include what occurs prior actually designing or attempting to control the servicescape: managers should define *behaviours* which they desire from both employees and customers. (Swartz, Iacobucci, 2000) refer to the work of environmental psychologists who suggest individuals react to physical places through two forms of behaviour: *approach* or *avoidance*. In the context of sports club attractiveness for young athletes, *the approach* would mean forming positive emotions towards a place, and desire to join and affiliate themselves with a sports club – while *avoidance* behaviours would mean the opposite.

Pritchard, Stinson (2014:153) explain the reasons behind consumer approaching, saying that avoiding, joining or remaining in a certain servicescape depend on individual *emotional* responses (pleasure, satisfaction, loyalty, arousal, disappointment) which occur during service delivery and the interaction between an organization and customers. Thus, repeated customer satisfaction will inevitably lead to loyalty, and will increase of attractiveness of these organizations. In the context of sports industry, the customers will exhibit sports-loyal behaviours, such as repeat purchasing and continued attendance or participation. In the sports organization, such customers are recognized to be the key to a sports organization's success.

### 3.3.4 Servicescape and People

Swartz, Iacobucci (2000:44) suggest that we should consider the environment not as a given, but as something that is *co-created* by its inhabitants. In other words, customers as well as employees are active moulders of their own experiences. They are both affected by the environment, as well as change, construct and mould the environment surrounding a service exchange.

This notion puts people in the epicentre of servicescape management. *Employees* and what they say, do or how they appear during an exchange of service with *a customer*, will inevitably influence consumer opinion, behaviour, or action. Hence it is argued that sports club employee appearance, behaviour, and accessibility can all affect the way consumers perceive the sports club and directly influence their decision to approach or avoid it (Pritchard, Stinson, 2014:146).

In corporate branding management, this relationship-based approach should shift from asking “how we perceive ourselves as an organization?” towards asking “what do our stakeholders expect of us as an organization?”, as Schultz et al. (2005:26) state. Therefore, managers must buy into the idea that *service environments need to be maintained* so as to be attractive with this service quality that they provide – and to do so, managers in sports organizations must communicate to staff the benefits of maintaining an efficient, well-thought-out and designed, clean, and well-kept *service environment* (dormitories, gyms, equipment rooms, training grounds, meeting rooms, restrooms) in which customers (athletes) achieve their service goals (such as, sleep, eat, train, learn).

Thus, managers need to manage the servicescape in which it can either help or hinder the ability of customers and employees to carry out their activities.:

“Sport organizations that leverage their corporate brand with the servicescape satisfy the customers more so than those service providers who fail to link the brand with its servicescape” (Pritchard, Stinson, 2014:153)

Summing up, an important component of the servicescape framework is the customer and employee via their *behaviours*; these behaviours come as a result of servicescape, but they can also impact the environment. Customers and employees can build, influence, rearrange, and even destroy the physical and social environment (Swartz, la-

cobucci, 2000:48), and this is an important conclusion for managing the corporate brand in practice.

## 4 Other Possible Elements Influencing on Attractiveness of Sports Clubs to Young Athletes

There are many possible other influencers due to which a *young Alpine skier* may develop into a professional. However, before they embark on such a journey, all future professional Alpine skiers first start out as children and youth athletes. At this moment, it is important for sports club to keep attractiveness to this young audience and the factors influencing their choices. Thus, other factors also need to be acknowledged as possible influencers.

### 4.1 Sports Club and Their Stakeholders

Sports clubs are the settings in which children and adolescents actively participate in sports and where coaches and other adults contribute through their actions.

In Alpine skiing, a sports club is naturally formed around a ski centre, close to ski slopes. In Koski's (1995:86) definition of a sports club he calls a sports club an open system that exploits the possibilities and resources of its immediate environment, while Beech and Chadwick (2013:26) define and use the word 'club' in three different ways: (1) club as a *construct* is characterized by heritage, loyalty, and it does not physically exist; (2) club as a *company* is comprised of owner(s), board, its business elements, finance, etc.; and (3) club as a *crew*, whereby the crew refers to the athletes and is typically highly transient in definition.

Balmer et al. (2017:140) identifies *primary* and *secondary* stakeholders, whereby primary stakeholders are those whom an organization has regular interaction with and are of strategic significance. While secondary stakeholders are those who become relevant around specific issues. In the context of sports club, the primary stakeholders would be the customers (athletes and their parents), employees (coaches and trainers), sponsors & community (ski resort owners, for instance) as they are of strategic significance, while media, volunteers, race hosts and organizers are all typically deemed more relevant in a specific context and are generally of lesser strategic importance. This shows how dependent on each other sports clubs and their stakeholders truly are.

Figure 6 presents key stakeholders as defined in Beech and Chadwick (2013:495).

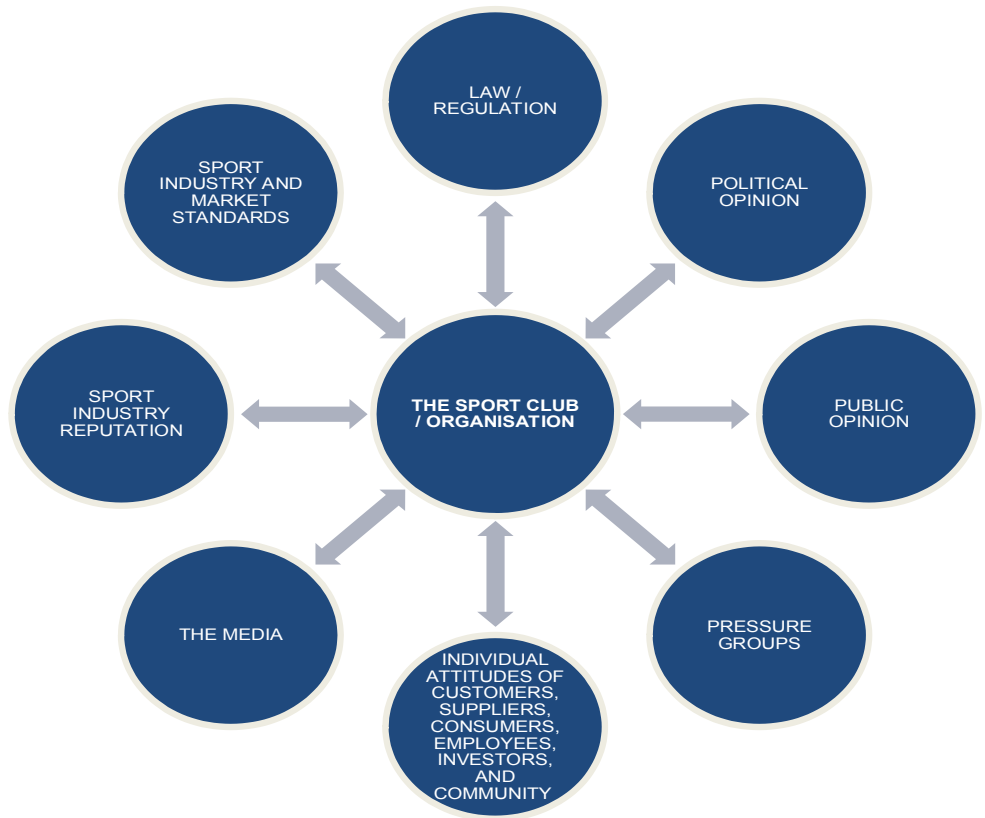


Figure 6: Key influences on sports organizations (in Beech and Chadwick 2013:495).

The wide range of external stakeholders within a sports club bring a variety of influences on sports clubs. They also bring volatility and uncertainty to their existence and strain on their operations.

The primary stakeholder is obviously *the young athlete*. Professional sports are formed around them. This means young people are encouraged to participate, specialize and excel in a sport, so they could develop elite skills and move to higher levels of competition, and contribute to the brand of the clubs. They also actually *make* the clubs' existence possible.

To get to the stage of being *eligible* for one of the professional sports clubs, young professional athletes first need to go through several stages of *talent selection* and *stay motivated* by the sport long enough to consider entering this prestigious talent pool. On the other hand, sports club need to develop and sustain level of *attractiveness* for young athletes to even consider joining their club. Thus, to become a professional skier

and elect Alpine skiing as their sport of choice, a young athlete must first be *attracted* to the sport and its environment to the point of *exclusively committing to it*.

Since services offered by sports clubs are experience-based (i.e. experienced through usage), it is important to establish a club brand reputation - achieved through positive brand experiences for the customer (young athlete). As sports clubs – much like any organization – they need to fight for existence, and their performance is vital in *attracting, retaining, and meeting the expectations* of various stakeholders: members, volunteers and donors (Schultz et al., 2005:133). Therefore, sports clubs need to establish a positive reputation and communicate it well to the young athletes. Thus, as they face several talent selection processes, this process itself can influence the attractiveness of a sports club for a young athlete.

#### 4.2 Talent Selection

Research in Prettyman and Lampman (2011:14) offers these conclusions on specialization in sports:

“When children play a variety of sports before they are 12 years old and then gradually become more specialized during early adolescence, they are more likely to be motivated and committed to their sport.”

Before the needed full-time commitment to Alpine skiing, children, in general, start skiing at the age of three or four and join one of many ski clubs by the age of five or six. *All motor features*, i.e. strength, velocity, flexibility, coordination etc., as well as *psychological factors* like motivation, concentration, and the ability to sustain stress, directly *contribute to* competition performance and success achievement. (Prettyman and Lampman 2011:14) Hence, the attachment and attractiveness to Alpine skiing – or any sport – can also be viewed through the lenses of young athlete’s physical and psychological attributes. These attributes are put to test in various stages of young athlete’s career in the form of talent selection processes.

The first talent selection takes place at the age of 10 or 11, when children want to go to one of the ski clubs focusing on ski racing. At the age of 12 or 13, local team select the most talented skiers based on their results.

There may be several more talent selections, depending on the national federation and system in question. Typically, the second selection is at 15 or 16 years of age. At that

point, the best-of-the-best have a chance of joining the elite Alpine boarding schools. This is where they are enabled (and expected) to perform at their highest level prior entering senior level competition arena.

Presently, the age at which coaches attempt to identify talent has got younger, which may affect the decision on the attractiveness of a sports club, since the child may not yet formed this decision. For instance, not all kids age or develop at the same pace. Which tends to discourage the later-developing athletes, who are constantly comparing themselves to the current top performers while the same top performers are at risk of stagnation by not having sufficient challenge (Radamus, 2014).

Other challenges exist, such as a possible twelve-month difference within the same-age group of athletes (Prettyman and Lampman 2011:14) In other words, all these factors may act as influencers on the attractiveness of the sport and a particular sports club for a young athlete.

#### 4.3 National Traditions, Heritage and Sponsorships

While examining different elements influencing attractiveness of a sport and sports clubs for young athletes, some researchers identify national traditions, as well as national role models as contributing factors in this process. Radamus (2014) claims a successful national system should ensure accessible, fun, healthy and fulfilling competition for all participants in sports, while at the same time creating role models and national success that inspires participation in sports.

In skiing, Finland is considered an all-around winter-sports nation, with regular international success enjoyed in Nordic skiing, hockey, ski jumping, ice-skating, as well as Alpine skiing. In Finland, it was especially Nordic skiing that had great impact on national level. Seen as a democratic sport, the Outdoor Association of Finland began as a cross-country ski group in 1938 and developed it into a true national sport in Finland. As it gained popularity, Nordic skiing yielded more participants on both amateur and professional level. Which then yielded one important part of the sport marketing mix – that of sponsorship of individual athletes, teams, events, and organizations.

#### 4.4 Sports Club's Relationships

The concept of *sports club relationships* with their stakeholders is defined as part of relationship marketing, describing all marketing activities directed toward *establishing, developing, and maintaining* successful relationship exchanges (Bee, Kahle, 2006:102).

In practice, this means a young athlete's *attraction* to a sports club can derive from their own (or their parents' or friends') past and present attitudes, commitment, involvement, trust, and shared values with the club. Hence, the sum of these interactions will form a psychological attachment leading to presence or lack of *attractiveness* to a sports club.

According to Koski (2001:260), state funding in the context of Finnish sport clubs, had been distributed according to the political decisions and conditions in the past, but is nowadays distributed according to the results. Thus, this sport also benefits from its association with sponsorship, as teams are able to purchase much needed equipment and individual athletes no longer have to rely on state funding only.

Summing up, as this chapter showed, *attractiveness* of sports club to an athlete can be influenced by *various* elements. Some have roots in the past (heritage, national status), others in athlete's performance track-record and club selection criteria. And some are dependent on the success of corporate branding execution by the sports club. Ultimately, the concept of attractiveness is rooted in some level of *psychological attachment* to a sports club. Researchers observe this movement from transactional relationship (whereby an athlete purely pays for the services of a sports club) into a psychological attachment and *relational* attitude, and suggest that sports organizations should strive to develop this kind of deeper level of relationship with their target customers (Bee, Kahle, 2006:102).

#### 4.5 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Aiming to propose elements of corporate branding that play an important role to sports clubs - in order to make them more attractive to young athletes - this Thesis select and merges the following ones.



Figure 8 presents a visual presentation of the conceptual framework of this Study.

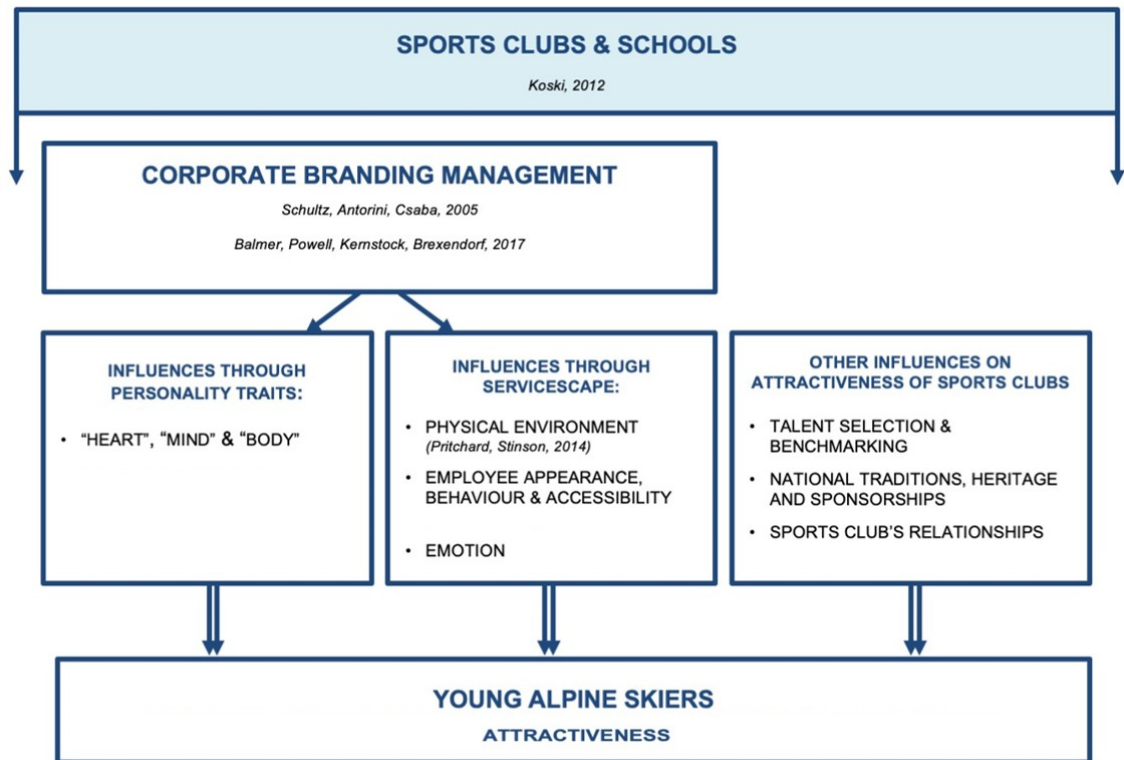


Figure 8: Conceptual Framework of this study.

Firstly, based on the concepts of Corporate branding applied into the context of sports clubs, the concepts of *Personality Traits* and *Servicescape* were found especially relevant. Corporate branding was explored based especially on the studies by Schultz et al. (2005), Balmer et al. (2017). They serve as the basis of the identified corporate brand elements influencing the attractiveness of sports club for young athletes (see in Figure 8 below).

The elements of *Personality Traits* were identified based especially on the studies by Balmer et al. (2017). The elements of *Servicescape* were identified based especially on the studies by, as well as Pritchard and Stinson (2014) and Swartz, Iacobucci (2000). Both of these elements are portrayed as two main influences on young athletes and their decision and desire to be associated with a specific sports club.

Thirdly, *other possible* influences on attractiveness of Sports Clubs were also recognized, thus creating a more complex picture of how attractiveness emerges for a young professional Alpine skier. Here, focus was placed on three identified influencers - the

process of talent selection; the role of national traditions, heritage and sponsorship; and the ultimate role of developing relationships with the sports club. Here, the ideas of Bee, Kahle (2006), Koski (2012) serve as key sources that contributed to conceptual framework.

Next, section 5 will apply this conceptual framework to gain results from the current state analysis. Specifically, the main components of the conceptual framework presented in Figure 8 will be applied to explore corporate branding practices within four sports clubs in Finland; their corporate brand management activities, as well as different influences on young athletes.

## **5 Analysis of Corporate Branding Practices in Four Finnish Alpine Ski Organizations**

The analysis follows the structure and concepts discussed in “Literature and Best Practice on Corporate Branding Management”. The results identify the key influences on attractiveness of Sports clubs for young athletes within four interviewed Sports clubs.

### **5.1 Overview of the Current State Analysis Stage**

The current state analysis was conducted based on the inputs from the representatives of 4 Alpine skiing organizations in Finland. All participants represented top management and were selected due to their in-depth knowledge of the current corporate branding practices as well as every day live of their organizations.

First, the study touched the background of their Ski Organizations for young athletes in Finland, and then focused on the investigation of their Corporate Branding practices, also trying to explore their connections to their organizations’ attractiveness in the context of sports clubs. To conduct the interviews, several key concepts from literature were utilized (corporate branding and servicescape especially).

The study used detailed and personalized interviews to collect enough material for the analysis. The analysis was conducted by: (1) reading through the interview responses and looking for patterns and themes, (2) grouping themes in a meaningful way; and (3) identifying responses that seem to have been given sincerely and with enthusiasm, as opposed to those that the participants answered in only a few words.

Finally, by selecting the key findings from the Current state analysis this study selected and groups the identified findings in a meaningful way. The goal here was to identify weaknesses that should be tackled next, in a Proposal.

### **5.2 Background: Ski Organizations for Young Athletes in Finland**

Alpine Ski Schools (Schools and Gymnasiums) are viewed to have positive influence on ski attractiveness as a sport in Finland. In fact, some respondents argue, that in

Finnish Alpine skiing, Gymnasiums are essential for the very survival of the sport (Director, Alpine Ski Club).

These institutions have a long history and success records; however, they seem not to have enough attractiveness for the young athletes. Having not enough skiers lays foundation to many challenges. Here, the endangered state of the complex Finnish youth skiing system became more clear:

The number of skiers accepted into Alpine schools (Gymnasiums) is a clear measurement of the success of Ski Clubs. Last year (2018) just under 10 skiers applied to Alpine Schools. So, Ski Clubs managed to produce in whole Finland under ten skiers! It is a very low number and it is a huge risk for Finnish ski world. If things go on like this in the future, it will collapse. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

Additionally, there is a clear discrepancy in the respondents' opinions for the goals of training needed for young athletes – some stress professional approach, while other support a less serious approach.

A Ski Club should provide tools to young athletes, to get them enthusiastic about the sport, sports in general and an active way of life. Not too specialized training. (Director, Alpine Ski Club)

Fun and only ground skills should be primary focus. (Director, Alpine Ski Team)

Ski clubs, while struggling to attract skiers, are facing problems of their own:

The resources of the skiing Clubs are limited. More support is required. (Director, Alpine Ski School)

All respondents found consensus that *Ski clubs need to be more attractive to young athletes*, so that they can continue and progress to more senior levels. This pointed to the need to explore the image of Alpine skiing clubs for young athletes and Finnish public in general.

### 5.3 Role of Corporate Brand Management in Four Ski Organizations in Finland

Analysis of the corporate branding practices amongst 4 respondents revealed that corporate branding as a concept is present in all four organizations' and their day-to-day operations:

Branding is very much discussed within our organization. We work all the time with our partners, to we have communications and marketing strategies ... Furthermore, as a brand, we have certain guidelines and values we want to show in terms of skiing. (Director, Alpine Ski Club)

All respondents acknowledge the need to improve on branding practices among their organizations. One respondent believes branding is generally not executed well amongst Alpine Ski Clubs in Finland, and others point that a lot can still be done – especially on a club level:

Overall, we have a pretty good brand. We want to be part of our resort area and identify ourselves as part of this society. At the Finnish Championship races last winter, we focused on co-operation with local companies and people. As a part of the local municipality, we get crucial amount of funding from there, so it is natural that our brand is closely tied to the Ski Resort and the destination itself. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

My strict and only opinion is that success, top results, make the brand. With results, you have something to tell. All the other attempts are *pure lying*. You need a story to tell - and in top sport - this story is story of success, locally and nationally. Then the public grows an interest, and people are keen and excited. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

Also, all stressed that, when it comes to the effects of corporate branding, the attractiveness of corporate brand influences ability to raise funds: *“the better you brand something, the more money you will be able to get for it. Same applies to skiing world and clubs, schools... It brings good sponsors”* (Director, Ski Club).

In context of branding, we have communications and marketing strategies that are communicated to skiers. Furthermore, as a brand, we have certain guidelines and values we want to show in terms of skiing. But we must improve this, since branding is generally not executed well among our Clubs. (Director, Alpine Ski Club)

Thus, it shows that Corporate branding practices of the approached Sports clubs are somewhat *stuck* in Corporate branding myths (those identified by Schultz et al. 12: 2005) and are often seen as the same as product and service branding, or something which is done by their marketing staff.

We have home pages, Facebook, clothing, sponsors, advertising platforms as mini-buses, yearly magazine, broadcasting. We have a pretty strong brand. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

Participants agree that the attractiveness of Ski Club and Schools must be improved. Their suggestion is maximizing success stories of active Alpine Skiers, which would help engage general public and attract more participants. Thus, a deeper look into the

elements that contribute to Corporate branding beyond marketing (such as, for example, servicescape or personality traits) is not yet widespread among the participants.

#### 5.4 Stakeholders and Services of Four Ski Organizations in Finland

Table 2 below presents services available in all 4 case organizations. The respondents point that they can see 4 main groups of stakeholders: (1) young athletes, (2) parents, (3) employees, and (4) general public. Services for these groups of stakeholders can be summarized as follows:

SERVICES AVAILABLE TO:	CASE ORGANIZATIONS			
	ALPINE SKI CLUB	ALPINE SKI SCHOOL	ALPINE SKI GYMNASIUM	ALPINE SKI TEAM
	FOLLOW A 9 MONTH SKI PROGRAM	FOLLOW 12 MONTH SKI PROGRAM		OFFERS PERSONAL TRAINERS FOR EACH ATHLETE
	BASIC DRY TRAINING PROGRAM DURING SUMMER	FULL DRY LAND SUMMER TRAINING PROGRAM		FULL DRY LAND SUMMER PROGRAM
	OBTAIN ELEMENTARY KNOWLEDGE OF SKI TECHNIQUE	DEDICATED SKI RESORT, OBTAIN ADVANCED SKI KNOWLEDGE		DEDICATED SKI RESORTS LOCALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY, ADVANCED SKI KNOWLEDGE
	INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION ONLY FOR TOP ATHLETES	INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS, MAINLY IN EUROPE FOR ENTIRE TEAMS		WORLD-WIDE INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS
	TRY OUT CAMPS / PRACTICES PRIOR JOINING	ACADEMIC EDUCATION SIDE-BY-SIDE SKIING		PERSONAL SPONSORS, MEDIA EXPOSURE
	YEARLY EVENTS	LIMITED POSSIBILITY TO GAIN PERSONAL SPONSORSHIP DEALS		OWN TRANSPORTATION, FULL EQUIPMENT SPONSORSHIP AND MAINTENANCE
		USAGE OF DORMATORY FACILITIES, GYMS, TRANSPORTATION		FULL TIME MEDICAL STAFF, PHYSIOTHERAPISTS
		SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS, PARTIES AND CELEBRATIONS		SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS, PARTIES AND CELEBRATIONS
	POSSIBILITY TO GET INVOLVED WITH THE TEAM MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION	CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK FROM COACHING STAFF ON THEIR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT		POSSIBILITY TO WATCH CLUB COMPETITIONS
	INTRODUCTORY KNOW-HOW ON HOW TO TAKE CARE OF SKI EQUIPMENT OF THEIR CHILDREN	POSSIBILITY TO WATCH CLUB COMPETITIONS		SOCIAL MEDIA PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GROUPS, PUBLICATIONS AND NEWSLETTERS
	POSSIBILITY TO WATCH CLUB COMPETITIONS	SOCIAL MEDIA PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GROUPS, PUBLICATIONS AND NEWSLETTERS		ACCESS TO SOME OF SPONSORSHIP BENEFITS
	FOOD AND BEVERAGE FACILITIES CLOSE TO TRAINING GROUNDS	FOOD AND BEVERAGE FACILITIES CLOSE TO TRAINING GROUNDS		FOOD AND BEVERAGE FACILITIES CLOSE TO TRAINING GROUNDS
	FEEDBACK SESSIONS AND MEETINGS TO TRACK THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR CHILD	POSSIBILITY TO JOIN SKI TRIPS ABROAD		CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS
	INTRODUCTION MEETINGS PRIOR JOINING THE CLUB	CONTRACT SIGNING / ADMITTANCE INTO THE SCHOOL MEETING & NEGOTIATIONS		
EMPLOYEES	OFTEN ONLY 9 MONTHS OF EMPLOYMENT OFFERED	FULL-YEAR EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEED, WITH LONGER SUMMER HOLIDAYS		FULL-YEAR EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEED

	FREE SEASONAL SKI-TICKETS FOR THE RESORT WHERE COACHING	PAID ACCOMODATION AND FOOD	ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD DURING TRAVELS
	OWNERSHIP OF DEVELOPMENT GROUPS	USAGE OF DORMATORY AND TRAINING GROUND FACILITIES	USAGE OF A VARIETY OF SERVICES WITHIN SKI RESORTS
	POSSIBILITY FOR EQUIPMENT SPONORSHIP	GUARANTEED BASIC EQUIPMENT FROM SPONSOR	FULL EQUIPMENT SPONSOR
	SOCIAL MEDIA PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GROUPS, PUBLICATIONS AND NEWSLETTERS	TRANSPORTATION SERVICES ON DEMAND	PERSONAL SPONSORED CAR
		OPPORTUNITY TO FOLLOW ATHLETES INTO THEIR SENIOR (SKI TEAM) CAREEERS	MEDIA EXPOSURE, POSSIBILITIES FOR OTHER REVENUE STREAMS
		SOCIAL MEDIA PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GROUPS, PUBLICATIONS AND NEWSLETTERS	SOCIAL MEDIA PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GROUPS, PUBLICATIONS AND NEWSLETTERS
	SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS, NEWSLETTERS	ANNUAL PRINTED MAGAZINE INFORMING THE PUBLIC ON SCHOOL'S ACTIVITIES, PLANS AND ACHIEMENTS	PRODUCING ELITE ATHLETES
	ATTRACTING AND KEEPING YOUTH IN SPORTS	SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS, NEWSLETTERS	INTERNATIONAL AMBASSADORS OF THE NATION, SPORT, DESTINATION, VALUES
	CONTRIBUTING TO THE MAINTENANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL SKI SLOPES	RACE ORGANIZITIONS	RACE ORGANIZATIONS
	JOB PROVIDERS	"OPEN DAY" FOR PUBLIC TO SKI WITH THE ELITE YOUNG SKIERS	JOB PROVIDERS
		JOB PROVIDERS	DEVELOPMENT OF SKI RESORTS AND SPORTS
			SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS, NEWSLETTERS

Table 2: Overview of services to various stakeholders (based on online and printed materials from the 4 interviewed sports organizations).

Table 2 summarizes the services common for the Finnish Alpine ski system and present in the 4 case organizations (namely, the Alpine ski club, Alpine ski school & Gymnasium, and Alpine Ski Team (the National team). All these services have specific objectives and target stakeholders. As seen from Table 2, there are both, differences and similarities in the services each organization is capable of offering to its stakeholders.

The comparison shows quite a rich service offerings available at the Alpine ski organizations. It should also point to the fact that these organizations all differ in their size, budget allocations, organizational activity, sponsorship and management.

In addition, Table 2 provides the foundation to discuss the servicescape in the offered services in relation to: A) physical environment, B) people, C) emotions. They are presented further in the text.

## 5.5 Servicescape in Corporate Branding of Alpine Ski Organizations

Servicescape, as discussed in Section 3, embraces a range of clues that aim to arouse specific types of responses in the customers. The scope of servicescape, as discussed, includes: (1) *physical environment*; (2) *emotional effects*; (3) *social environment*. The interviews with four respondents point to recognition of the role of each of these components on the young athletes.

*Emotions* are important since they re-engage people and athletes to the sport. According to respondents, the emotions tie young athletes and fans to skiing are built in this way:

The general public is constantly moving from one sport to another sport - depending on success. So, true fanaticism is what comes from within... This fanaticism also means business... We have some potential in Alpine skiing, and we have had a lot of children racers in the past and we still have. They create the group with their parents who can start that culture. That's why it is important to have recreational skiers, they can become coaches, ski club volunteers and fans of Alpine ski racing. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

On the slope, our coaches communicate with skiers through radio. These skiers are freezing for most of the season. Every morning, every evening. Conditions can be very harsh, nothing pretty. So, they must be crazy a little bit to still be around. Since there is nothing pretty about it, it is an extreme sport in many ways. Maybe that is exactly why they stick around and go to their next practice? (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

Another source to create these emotions, one of the key components of Servicescape is *the employee* appearance, their behaviour and accessibility. All four respondents outlined their coaching staff make the strongest effect on their corporate brand.

Ours is a big organization consisting of schools, logistics, minibuses, trainers, health support, financial support and so on. To be successful, we need all these things in addition to great coaches and program. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

*The relationships* which coaches, employees and other members of staff within a Ski Club with young athletes was described as multi-dimensional. The respondents view Alpine Ski Clubs developing top athletes through relationships: such as personal growth of a person (athlete's personality, character); education and top sport training; taking care of rehabilitation, teamwork, and a disciplined way to achieve results (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium):

Alpine schools help build healthy and well-balanced people. The self-esteem and self-image of sportsmen are built through sport... Skiing also is so much more



than only practice on the slope. Kids must also go to school make sure to successfully complete their studies. (Director, Alpine Ski Team)

The Alpine Schools work in different levels: training, health, nutrition, mental, school, graduating, turn from teenager to young adult... social relationships, friendships, etc. All this is reflected in the way our trainers approach children, their parents. (Director, Alpine Ski School)

Beyond education, respondents also evaluated *the physical environment* which young athletes are placed into:

Young athletes want to join our ranks as our name – and yes, location – comes with a pedigree. We are known to produce top skiers, and we are Finland's best known ski resort. This of course influences parents when approaching us or when we scout for talented kids during competitions. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

All respondents agreed that *social interactions* are very important and make a critical part in corporate branding:

We are telling our story in yearly magazine, Facebook and home pages. The important thing is that parents of our skiers and coaches are justifying this story to be true. We are very concerned when we hear opposite stories among parents and coaches. We have put efforts to do better work with young skiers, who in turn, tell positive stories about us, and attract future generations. (Director, Alpine Ski Club)

Conclusions based on the interview materials are further discussed below, separately for each element of servicescape.

## 5.6 Personality Traits and Their Role in Attractiveness of Alpine Ski Organizations

All the respondents agreed that values should be defined by any sports club and should be reflected in the behaviour and actions of its employees and management.

While all respondents cited professionalism and responsibility towards children and athletes as one of the guiding values for their organizations, one respondent cites transparency and honesty as the main foundation of their operations.

However, while focusing on athletes and coaching staff, they view this through the prism of sponsorship and finances, as additional funding helps them achieve more success.

One Ski Club sees the importance in recognizing top athletes as human beings, as it prescribes humane values to the overall process of producing top athletes.

Our basic value is: the athlete is a human being. This is the story we are telling and I believe that we succeeded to do it pretty well. (Director, Alpine Ski Team)

Six different personality traits were listed to the respondents. All three respondents who offered their responses unanimously said that all six personality traits are present in their organizations and day-to-day operations. However, all three also admitted that no such exercise was ever conducted among them and their employees. Therefore, none of the respondents identified a specific personality trait that describes their Ski Club or is necessarily clearly linked with delivery of their services and management style.

The “Body” trait of an organization assumes its agility and collaborative nature. In search of a general impression, encompassing all ski clubs, schools and gymnasiums, the respondents were asked to provide a critical analysis of the Finnish ski system in relation to maximizing development of top talented athletes. Some confirmed the biggest issue lies with the lack of *coherent, industry-wide, systemic collaborative strategy*:

Ski clubs are struggling. The success at children races is more and more based on hard work of their parents, not the system. Only very few ski clubs are working properly any more. The Alpine schools are able to give more professional way of work to reach top level. Whereas the Ski clubs really need to think how to re-organize their work so that they can guarantee a program targeted at those who want to go for top-level skiing. There is some kind of horror balance, the costs and quality: Alpine schools need to calculate the best possible input with reasonable costs. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

One of the key suggestions is to manage the image and reputation of the sport, and work towards creating a stronger emotional ownership towards the sport and the club among existing and future athletes, their parents, fans, and employees.

We have some potential in Alpine skiing, and we have had a lot of young racers in the past as well as now. They create the group with their parents who can start the culture around the sport. That’s why it is important to have recreational skiers, they can become coaches, ski club volunteers and fans of Alpine ski racing. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

## 5.7 Other Influences on Ski Club’s Attractiveness: Public Image, Sponsorship, Funding, Relationships

Despite some Alpine ski clubs experienced success in attracting young athletes, some respondents believe no club or team has historically had a strong enough corporate image which would ensure its existence year after year (Director, Alpine Ski Team).

When it comes to recognition of the sport and success stories in Alpine skiing, as well as the level of engagement, the respondents see Finland lagging behind countries such as Norway or Austria. – both traditionally recognized as homes of ski passion and fanaticism.

A strong emotional attachment to Alpine skiing by the general public was recently only achieved with Kalle Palander and Tanja Poutiainen (both retired World Cup Alpine ski racers from Finland whom have enjoyed success on the international stage of competitions), but has not been able to surface in recent years (Director, Alpine Ski School).

One respondent sees the necessity to produce top-level, successful athletes and combine it with a more advanced strategic branding of skiing as a sport in Finland (Director, Ski Club). The respondents believe that Austria and Norway are far ahead in terms of young ski athlete management, public regard of the sport, and the development systems in these countries:

We need to be fanatic about skiing if we are to find success in every level, from ski clubs to National teams. Olympic gold medals, World Cup crystal balls, World Championship medals will bring popular engagement, as well as the support of Olympic committee, municipalities and sponsors. But the PR will not be successful if we do not have a story to tell, and story that the public wants to hear. We need all stakeholders to work for this, but it is very far away compared to what is done in Norway or Austria. But I think it is not only the problem of Alpine ski racing, the same challenge applies to Nordic skiing, ski jumping and biathlon. As long as there is success to build the story around, there is interest, too. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

After discussing recreational skiers, volunteers and fans of Alpine ski racing, who devote part of their time and/or money, the question surrounding the financial support is raised.

Based on responses, while one organization has an exact value placed on sponsorship financial support (8% of their total yearly budget is accounted from sponsorship deals), other organizations have little much common when it comes to funds allocation through sponsorship deals. Some rely on a strong sponsorship base (20-40 sponsors each year are attracted by the club), while other claim they are fully dependant on sponsorship deals – or even more dramatically – their existence would not be possible if it were not for the sponsorship deals made each year.

The primary reason for such a situation is reported to have origins in an inconsistent and unequal distribution of government/state/municipality financial support: three out of four respondents claim that the state does not support with a proper *value for money* model (Director, Alpine Ski School; Director, Ski Club) whereby schools or clubs which are more successful would be awarded with a larger sum of funds. In fact, there should be a change in the culture of funding sports in Finland, the government and the business (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium).

One respondent claims the state support should be bigger, therefore eliminating a high dependency on private and corporate sponsorships (Director, Ski Club). Two respondents, both Directors in elite Ski Schools and Gymnasiums, see that municipality support is crucial to their operations and the sums awarded are – sufficient:

The municipality funding makes Alpine Gymnasiums possible. So, in those terms, this source of funding is really important to the sport. Then again, Gymnasiums are really essential to athlete development in Alpine skiing in Finland. (Director, Alpine Ski Club)

School has a very good situation with municipality funds – it accounts for about 45% of our budget. Olympic committee funds us about 4% of budget and Ski Sport Finland with same amount. We have some other funds equalling about 3 % of budget. The rest of the budget, about 48%, is paid by athletes' parents. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

In a system so heavily dependent on municipal, state, private and corporate funding; and yet a system founded on passion and love for a sport, the importance of volunteerism is obvious. All four respondents confirm the importance of volunteer work. However, the extent of volunteers presence within their work differs greatly. Some identify volunteers as strong contributing factor towards their club operations and existence:

Without voluntary work our racing system and race organisations would not be able to work. I think on a larger scale we have a rich culture amongst the small ski racing community and people are enthusiastic in the sport. (Director, Alpine Ski Club)

Other identify voluntary work as important – but a smaller piece – of a larger funding scheme:

As a professional organization with seven employees, we see volunteer work only as a part of our organization and execution of our goals: it is an important part, but not crucial. Volunteer work is for us to cover travelling costs, accommodation, food and so on. (Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium)

Summing up the respondents' input, the Finnish alpine skiing is often in shadow of its counterparts, cross-country skiing, ski jumping, and especially hockey. However, it still carries an important role among general public. On professional level (as opposed to amateur), it is driven by Alpine Ski enthusiasts. Also, Finland had at least two famed, internationally recognized athletes, capable of attracting larger audiences to the sport, inspiring passion and fanaticism, and directly motivating participation in the sport – particularly amongst young audiences. Moreover, both national heritage and tradition of Alpine Skiing, while seen as important factors in defining the status of the sport, are not well-marketed and are under-utilized as sources of inspiration for new skiers.

## 5.8 Key Findings from the Current State Analysis

This sub-section provides an overview of the main strengths and weaknesses identified in the current brand management practices among four Alpine Ski organizations in Finland. Also separately, the key findings are summarized for: (a) Servicescape (b) Brand Personality Traits, within these four organizations. Firstly, a summary of the current state of Finnish Alpine Skiing is presented as a general background:

MAIN <b>STRENGTHS</b> OF THE CURRENT ALPINE SKI SYSTEM IN FINLAND	MAIN <b>WEAKNESSES</b> OF THE CURRENT ALPINE SKI SYSTEM IN FINLAND
<i>ALPINE SKI SCHOOLS ACHIEVING INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS</i>	<i>PRODUCING TOO FEW PROFESSIONAL ALPINE SKIERS, NOT ATTRACTING NEW ATHLETES</i>
<i>PROFFESIONAL STAFF</i>	<i>HIGH DROP-OUT RATES OF YOUNG ATHLETES FROM CLUB-LEVEL TO SKI SCHOOL-LEVEL</i>
<i>ENGAGEMENT OF COMMUNITIES, PARENTS AND ATHLETES</i>	<i>LACK OF STRATEGIC MANAGERMENTS AT SKI CLUB LEVEL</i>
<i>GOVERNMENT, MUNICIPAL AND SPONSORSHIP SUPPORT</i>	<i>NEED FOR MORE FINANCIAL SUPPORT</i>

Findings from the Current state analysis depicts the common challenges of Alpine Ski organizations in Finland. Alpine Ski School and Gymnasium are spearheading the development of most talented Alpine skiers; however, they suffer from a declining number of new enrolees. Alpine Ski Club, which in traditional development path of young athletes, comes before Alpine Ski Schools, is also in a difficult position considering the importance of their role in the overall system. Tasked to attract athletes to join the sport of Alpine skiing, they are also responsible for keeping them in the sport long enough to start competing, and to develop talented young athletes who would later join the ranks

of Alpine Ski Schools and Gymnasiums. All while facing financial and organizational challenges of their own.

The following are the main strengths and weaknesses of the current *corporate branding practices* in 4 sports organizations:

MAIN <b>STRENGTHS</b> OF THE CURRENT CORPORATE BRANDING PRACTICES IN 4 SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS	MAIN <b>WEAKNESSES</b> OF THE CURRENT CORPORATE BRANDING PRACTICES IN 4 SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS
<i>BRANDING AS A CONCEPT (ITS IMPORTANCE AND ROLE) RECOGNIZED BY ALL 4 ORGANIZATIONS</i>	<i>CONFUSED WITH TRADITIONAL MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PRACTICES</i>
<i>CONSENSUS THAT CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT OF HAS A DIRECT INFLUENCE ON THE PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS THEIR SKIERS &amp; ATTRACTIVENESS TO YOUNG ATHLETES</i>	<i>STRENGTH OF CORPORATE BRAND TIED TO WINNING AND COMPETITION SUCCESS</i>
<i>CLUBS NURTURE THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAKEHOLDERS</i>	<i>CORPORATE BRANDING NOT SUFFICIENTLY RECOGNIZED AS A SEPARATE FACTOR IN ATTRACTING NEW ATHLETES</i>

Thus, the Current State Analysis among 4 sports clubs further revealed that each of organizations suffers from either complete lack or to a some degree poor corporate branding practice. Also, traditional branding and marketing activities have larger operational presence, corporate branding is still not attended to sufficiently. Yet, currently, almost all organizations see that their overall branding activity has a very significant influence on both success of athletes' performance as well as their attraction to the sport and ski club.

- a) Main strengths and weaknesses of the current use of *Servicescape* (as part of corporate branding practices) in 4 sports organizations.

MAIN <b>STRENGTHS</b> OF THE CURRENT USE OF <b>SERVICESCAPE</b> (AS PART OF CORPORATE BRANDING PRACTICES) IN 4 SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS	MAIN <b>WEAKNESSES</b> OF THE CURRENT USE OF <b>SERVICESCAPE</b> (AS PART OF CORPORATE BRANDING PRACTICES) IN 4 SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS
<i>ALPINE SKI CLUBS ARE PEOPLE-BUSINESS, DRIVEN BY COACHES AND STAFF AND THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH ATHLETES</i>	<i>CLUBS DO NOT ARTICULATE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ENOUGH, NOR THEY USE THEM ENOUGH IN RECRUITING PRACTICES AND ATTRACTING TALENT</i>
<i>STRONG EMOTIONAL COMMITMENT – EVEN FANATICISM – PRESENT IN SERVICE DELIVERY AMONG ALL STAKEHOLDERS</i>	<i>EMOTION NOT YET USED AS ONE OF THE CORPORATE BRANDING PILLARS TO ELEVATE THE SPORT OF CLUB IMAGE</i>

<p>FACILITIES ARE SEEN AS A STRONG ADDED-VALUE IN SKI WORLD, INCLUDING WITH ATTRACTING NEW ATHLETES, i.e. HIGH QUALITY SERVICE DELIVERY IS SEEN THROUGH SERVICESCAPE'S PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT COMPONENT</p>	<p>INFLUENCING PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT IS NOT FULLY RECOGNIZED AS IMPORTANT FACTOR IN SERVICE DELIVERY; IS DEPENDENT ON FINANCIAL SUPPORT</p>
<p>PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT RECOGNIZED AS A FACTOR IN SERVICE DELIVERY MAINLY DUE TO OUTDOOR/WEATHER INFLUENCES</p>	<p>CLUBS DO NOT LEVERAGE CORPORATE BRANDING WITH THE SERVICESCAPE; THEIR BAND IS NOT DIRECTLY LINKED WITH SERVICESCAPE</p>

Current state analysis portrayed the Finnish Alpine ski environment to be formed by a dedicated group of enthusiasts, driven by passion and emotion, aiming to recreate some of the international success Finnish Alpine skiers have enjoyed in the past. To achieve this, these Sports clubs attribute strong importance to all stakeholders involved. They form special physical surroundings, and strive to provide emotional and social ties, where athletes can successfully develop. They exist in a built physical environment that allows a close relationship between ski club employees and relevant stakeholders such as athletes, parents, and sponsors. However, they recognize they have failed to make themselves attractive enough to new and existing athletes.

- b) Main strengths and weaknesses of the current use of *Personality Traits* (as part of corporate branding practices) in 4 sports organizations.

<p>MAIN <b>STRENGTHS</b> OF THE CURRENT USE OF <b>PERSONALITY TRAITS</b> (AS PART OF CORPORATE BRANDING PRACTICES) IN 4 SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS</p>	<p>MAIN <b>WEAKNESSES</b> OF THE CURRENT USE OF <b>PERSONALITY TRAITS</b> (AS PART OF CORPORATE BRANDING PRACTICES) IN 4 SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS</p>
<p>PASSION AND DEDICATION BY EMPLOYEES RECOGNIZED ACROSS ALL ORGANIZATION</p>	<p>LACK OF STRONG "HEART" TRAITS WHICH WOULD LEAD TO FANATICISM AND POPULARITY REQUIRED BY THE SPORT</p>
<p>EACH CLUB IS TACKLING THE MARKET ON THEIR OWN, AND SOME ENJOY STRONG SUCCESS IN THE MARKET</p>	<p>LACK OF APPROPRIATE COLLABORATION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS, NO COMMON GOALS SET - CLEAR LACK OF "BODY" CHARACTERISTICS IN THE ENTIRE ALPINE SKI SYSTEM</p>
<p>ALL 6 PERSONALITY TRAITS PERCEIVED AS PRESENT IN FOUR CLUBS</p>	<p>NO PERSONALITY TRAIT CLEARLY IDENTIFIABLE WITH A SPECIFIC CLUB, NOR THESE ARE USED IN ATTRACTING NEW YOUNG ATHLETES</p>

The four (4) most important *weaknesses* recognized in this study are summarized as follows:

<p><b>FINNISH ALPINE SKI SYSTEM IS CHARACTERIZED BY A LACK OF COMMON STRATEGY BETWEEN SKI CLUBS AND SKI SCHOOLS</b></p>	<p>Tied to "body" personality traits of agility &amp; collaborative approach towards common goals</p>
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<p><b>CLUBS DO NOT LEVERAGE CORPORATE BRANDING WITH THE SERVICESCAPE AND AS THEIR BRAND REMAINS NOT DIRECTLY LINKED WITH SERVICESCAPE.</b></p>	<p><i>Tied to “servicescape” concept of corporate branding</i></p>
<p><b>THERE IS A LACK OF CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT ON ALPINE SKI CLUB AND SCHOOL LEVEL</b></p>	<p><i>Tied to general concept of corporate branding</i></p>
<p><b>ALPINE SKI YOUTH TALENT IS NOT SUFFICIENTLY MANAGED, RESULTING IN HIGH DROP-OUT RATES OF YOUNG ATHLETES FROM THE SPORT, AS WELL AS POOR ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE ALPINE SKI SCHOOLS FOR NEW ATHLETES</b></p>	<p><i>Tied to talent management and its linkage to corporate branding practices</i></p>

The four identified key weaknesses will now lead to the Proposal presented in Section 5.



## **6 Proposal for Improving the Current Corporate Branding Practices to Improve Attractiveness of Sports Clubs**

This section presents the Improvement proposal how to increase attractiveness of Sports clubs to young athletes.

### **6.1 Overview of the Proposal Building Stage**

Through this study, the focus for improvement is seen in articulating the relevance and impact of two Corporate Branding concepts - that of Servicescape and that of Personality Traits - can have in the context of managing sports clubs. Analysis of these two concepts in four Alpine Ski organizations – and linking them to organizational attractiveness - sheds light on the role of Corporate branding in the context of sports clubs. To build the foundation for the exploration of these concepts, several key concepts from literature were utilized. At this stage of the Proposal building, they will also be merged with the results of the Current state analysis; namely, used as proposal suggestions from Personality Traits framework and Servicescape.

In this stage, interviews were continued with 2 out of 4 top management representatives interviewed earlier for the current state analysis. The interviews were analyzed, again as in the current state analysis, by: (1) reading through the interview responses and looking for patterns and themes, (2) grouping themes in a meaningful way; and (3) identifying responses addressed and could contribute to fixing the identified weakness. In support of these 2 interviews, two more in-depth interviews were organized with the experienced Finish coaches, which were specifically focused on these areas where the top management respondents could not help much. These findings are then merged with the Conceptual framework elements (in Section 4), and together, they serve towards the building of the Improvement proposal.

### **6.2 Findings of Data Collection 2 (for Proposal Building)**

Proposal for improvement the current corporate branding practices was conducted together with 2 interview respondents representing two spheres of Finnish National Ski landscape – a director in Alpine Ski Gymnasium and an executive in Alpine Ski Club.

Equipped with knowledgeable of the results of the Current state analysis, together they offered some initial suggestions for A) better use of Personality Traits and Servicescape among Alpine ski clubs, and B) improvement of overall attractiveness – and factors influencing attractiveness – of the Alpine Ski Clubs to young athletes.

This section summarizes the findings from these 2 key stakeholders as their input for the Proposal building. The proposal was developed using a template, Table 2 shown below. Firstly, the summary of weaknesses and strengths from the Current state analysis (presented in Section 5.7 of this Thesis) was sent via email to the respondents. Secondly, each of them was briefed (again) on the concepts of Corporate branding, Servicescape and Personality traits. Third, they were asked to suggest improvement steps within their organizations, and Finnish Alpine ski system in general.

As they offered their suggestions on how to improve current branding practices, these suggestions were especially focused on (a) Personal Traits and (b) Servicescape contexts within Alpine ski clubs. While the responses and suggestions were very rich for some weaknesses, for the Servicescape, as it turned out, the input was somewhat limited in the knowledge of some grass-root, specific details. Therefore, two more interviews with the coached filled in these gaps. The total results are shown in Table 3 below.

<b>1<sup>ST</sup> KEY WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS</b>	
Finnish Alpine Ski system is characterized by a lack of collaborative common strategy between Ski Clubs and Ski Schools <i>(tied to “body” personality traits of agility in the market &amp; collaborative approach towards common goals)</i>	
<i>Suggestions for improvements from stakeholders.</i>	A) Need for redefining the roles of Ski Club and Ski Schools B) Need for more collaborative management style with Ski Clubs and Schools
<i>Detailed description /explanations of these suggestions</i>	There is a consensus between the representatives of both Ski Clubs and Ski Gymnasiums, that their organizations should redefine their roles and objectives within the scope of National Alpine Ski system Director of Alpine Ski Gymnasiums further asserts that organizations should implement a more collaborative management style, driven by partnerships and agility, thus stepping away from silo mentality
<b>2<sup>ND</sup> KEY WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS</b>	
Clubs do not leverage corporate branding with the Servicescape and as their brand remains not directly linked with Servicescape. <i>(tied to “Servicescape” concept of corporate branding)</i>	
<i>Suggestions for improvements from stakeholders</i>	Sports organizations should expand on their management of Corporate branding practices, which would then open doors towards linking their Ser-

holders.	vicescape with Corporate branding
Detailed description /explanations of these suggestions	<p>“Through this exercise and interviews, it seems we all learned we don’t necessarily hear the word <i>Corporate</i> when asked about Corporate branding. So, perhaps we need to revisit what is it that we already do, that really links to corporate branding. Servicescape as a concept, unsurprisingly, is not known to us, but its components are clearly in and around our clubs. Perhaps we would need a workshop on this topic in all our major clubs?” <i>Director, Alpine Ski Gymnasium suggests</i></p> <p>Alpine Ski Club Director suggest listing social, physical as well as emotional stimuli based on which their clubs are experienced, and portraying them to their staff members, to make them aware and remind of all things they need to pay attention to when selling their services to athletes or anyone else. He also points to the need for more specific investigation into this direction.</p>
<b>3<sup>RD</sup> KEY WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS</b>	
<p><i>There is a lack of corporate brand management in Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools.</i></p> <p><i>(Tied to general concept of Corporate Branding)</i></p>	
Suggestions for improvements from stakeholders.	<p>A) Corporate branding to be more clearly distinguished from traditional product/service branding practices for sports clubs</p> <p>B) Place importance on emotional ownership of these sports club brands.</p>
Detailed description /explanations of these suggestions	<p>Director of Alpine Ski Club asserts their brands require a stronger and clearer corporate identity, corporate communication platform, and should take better care of their image and corporate reputation. At the same time, Director of Alpine Ski Gymnasium suggests the need for emotional ownership among all stakeholders involved – young athletes, parents, fans, and employees of their Ski School</p>
<b>4<sup>TH</sup> KEY WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS</b>	
<p><i>Alpine ski youth talent is not sufficiently managed, resulting in high drop-out rates of young athletes from the sport, as well as poor attractiveness of the Alpine Ski Schools for new athletes.</i></p> <p><i>(tied to talent management and its linkage to corporate branding practices)</i></p>	
Suggestions for improvements from stakeholders.	<p>A) High drop-out rates of young athletes must be lowered through a mix of actions</p> <p>B) Attractiveness of Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools should be improved</p>
Detailed description /explanations of these suggestions	<p>A) Director of Alpine Ski Gymnasium suggests a combination of efforts should be undertaken to keep athletes in the sport, ranging from better talent management to implementing Corporate branding practices into club’s day-to-day operations</p> <p>B) Both Directors suggest an overhaul of marketing and branding activities done on a national level in the context of Alpine ski club and Schools, to achieve stronger attractiveness of their respective organizations, as well as the sport in general. They assert that in sports industry, much of attractiveness comes from success of athletes – national icons idolized by youth – therefore they see the suggested overhaul being somewhat contingent on international success of existing athletes</p>
<b>OTHER WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS</b>	
<p><i>No personality trait clearly identifiable with a specific club, nor these are used in attracting new young athletes.</i></p>	
Suggestions for improvements from stakeholders.	<p>1) Each sports organization should define those personality traits which resonate best with it, and use it to guide their employees and form organizational</p>

	<p><i>culture</i></p> <p>2) <i>Clear personality trait of a sports club should be viewed as an influencing factor in attracting athletes, sponsors, and new employees</i></p>
<p><i>Detailed description /explanations of these suggestions</i></p>	<p>To influence how their sports clubs would be viewed by others, Director at Alpine Sky Gymnasium suggests all clubs should place greater emphasis on their coaching staff (employees), since due to their proximity to parents and athletes (customers) they can best communicate value of their organizations</p> <p>Alpine Ski Club Director suggests defining their organization's brand personality, in order to help them better present themselves to the public</p>

Table 3. Key stakeholder suggestions for Proposal building (Data 2) in relation to findings from the Current state analysis (Data 1) and the key elements from Literature review and best practice in Corporate brand management for increasing attractiveness of Sports clubs.

Examining the key suggestions for improvements by two high-ranked employees of two Alpine ski clubs, it becomes clear that change within organizations must come gradually and in an appropriate sequence. Finnish Alpine Ski system consists of Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools which operate predominantly on their own, without a guiding and common, National development strategy. Yet, being part of a unified National Alpine ski system, these organizations are dependent on each other's performance and operations. If one of them fails, they all fail – the system fails.

For this reason, one of the key suggestions necessary prior to diving into *Corporate branding practices* and increasing attractiveness of Ski Clubs and Schools, is *to revisit and redefine roles which these organizations have* in the overall Finnish Alpine Ski environment. Both Directors agree that their coexistence in Finnish Alpine Ski world should be based *on collaboration and collective agility* to adapt to the needs of all stakeholders, and on finding common grounds on their organizational objectives and KPIs. Distribution of funds, talents management, talent selection, results and criteria benchmarking all fall under this common need for reevaluating the foundations on which the system is built.

Following this, participants offered their suggestion for sports clubs to A) better understand, define and implement the most vital *elements that Corporate branding encompasses* as an organizational activity; and B) to open their sports organizations to the *notion and use of Servicescape* in their day-to-day operations.

As for the Corporate branding, one participant offered a suggestion to conduct a series of workshops on Corporate branding to the key Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools. Not only

this would clarify preconceptions on Corporate branding, but would also pave the way to introduce the concept of Servicescape to these sports organizations.

*Servicescape* knowledge indicates that both physical environment and any human being present during the service encounter, will have an impact on satisfaction of consumers. Current state analysis indicates that sports clubs are generally aware of the role of services to young athletes. However, it is suggested by the Director of Alpine Ski Club, that all these social interactions, physical and emotional experiences are often forgotten or disregarded in the process of service delivery toward young athletes. According to the suggestions by the participants, by continuously reminding employees of the complexities of their roles and consequences of their attitude and behaviour, it would mean managing Servicescape. It would also mean managing the emotional attachment of all stakeholders (primarily their employees and athletes) have towards their clubs.

Final suggestion made by participants serves to tackle the lack of *Personality Traits* in defining corporate identity of their sports clubs. Instead of looking for cues in their daily operations which would point to the presence of each personality trait in their organizations (as literature suggests), management teams should identify their corporate brand through the usage of personality traits. These should reflect all values, words and actions of all their employees. As the Director in Ski Gymnasium points, ski clubs and schools “*tend to recognize the importance of their coaching staff, but they sometimes disregard how close to athletes and parents their employees are*”. Employees and what they say, do or how they appear during an exchange of service with young skiers, will inevitably influence their opinion, behaviour, or action – or even attraction to a sport club. Hence it is recommended by the Director of Ski Club, that all sports teams should define their personalities in order to more clearly and successfully present themselves to the public.

Summing up, as seen from the results, the 2 representatives were able to give but limited input into the Proposal building, especially in relation to the last two weaknesses, the Servicescape and Personality traits. Although their responses to the Corporate Branding weaknesses were very valuable. Therefore, at this stage of the study it was deemed necessary to deepen the investigation about the necessary improvements in relation to the Servicescape and Personality traits. Since the top managers could not give enough details for these topics, it was decided to ask the coaches who deal with

the servicescape and Personality trios on the daily basis. The sections below discuss the results from this group of respondents.

### 6.3 Suggestions from Interviews with the Coaches: The Employee Perspective

At this point, the opinions of the coaches were asked, as the persons who are closer to young athletes. Two coaches with 10+ year of experience were interviewed. Detailed field notes were taken to record their responses. The coaches gave their responses on all the areas of key weaknesses. However, their strongest interest focused on improving the servicescape. This may be due to the fact that they have first-hand experience of the servicescape (both as people closest to the young athletes as well as from their own immediate employee experience). The summary of responses is presented below.

In the evaluation of corporate branding practices, the coaches expressed the need to differentiate the Ski Sport Finland as a national team and the Ski Club for young athletes.

“On a National level, a lot of work has been done most of it towards sponsors, but is missing branding toward clubs and young athletes as well the work of how to attract more young skiers into the clubs.” (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

“Branding always existed in the organization but is not enough anymore; it should be more present with stronger routes.” (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

“One other problem is that we are the biggest club and after inertia the new athletes are arriving so the board is not so much worried about branding.” (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

Both coaches expressed interest and respect to branding, as they both find it relevant and they both have been discussing it in their organization. Regarding clarifying the roles, both respondents proposed more constructive meetings for staff and coaches for adding and sharing quality ideas, launching programs to change the present practices. Their inputs were especially evident for the Servicescape and Personality Traits areas.

#### 6.3.1 Analysis of Servicescape in Relation to Physical Environment

On significance of servicescape, the thoughts were mixed, and the true answer was missing:

“The ski school of the club was very popular the brand was strong especially when some superstars from the sport were helping to rebrand it, when Marcus Sandell was the face of the school and when he was a brand ambassador the

school was closing high numbers in new arrivals. But that was just one step, and it should have been invested more. For example, this year there was a problem with the snow and the ski school had low numbers they should have been better prepared and it will not hold for long this kind of branding if we don't start to offer more." (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

"Physical environment is tremendously important, since skiing is an outdoor sport. Equipment, storage rooms, facilities, etc. are not necessarily considered to be a part of the branding, but it probably has a larger effect than considered. Clothing is the only major part where specific branding choices are made". (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

Here is very visible the difference in the opinions of two highly experienced coaches but on different positions.

Talking about added value through the location design and setup, they make an example of the Ski Gymnasiums.

"Gymnasium is the only place where you can feel or create the right emotion, because of the time spent with your teammates. That's the place to be when the coaches are able to create a positive atmosphere a strong drive to motivate the athletes. In Gymnasiums' athletes are sharing rooms, they cook together, wash clothes, go to school, train... so they can really feel the emotion." (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

His suggestion also for Ski Clubs "to train more together, to sleep in the same accommodation, to travel together in mini vans - all things that could evoke deeper emotions."

Head Coach of the club thinks that for the beginning of young skiers path Metropolitan area is a good place to start.

"There is a lot of customers with money there are some minor facilities that are enough to start there is the biggest know-how but then the problem starts when they grow because they need to travel a lot and they need to train on more demanding hills." (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

In the recruitment process is still visible a big lack of possibilities and places how and where it could be done, so we asked how and where is the recruitment happening, the SSF coach and continues:

"Most of the recruiting is happening on the slope or in the restaurants under the slopes, but rarely clubs have their own space so there is no control of the board over the process of recruitment, and the biggest work is done by coaches (conversation with skiers and parents, with other coaches as well). For example, athletes come to Vihti (ski resort near Helsinki) for training and they have a discussion in the cafeteria, where you are not alone, where you don't have a nice, quiet place where you have the possibility to keep meetings and have presentations, maybe even more there are no club trophies no memorabilia and because of that people cannot attach to the sport. Comparing to some places abroad, for example, Tarnaby in Sweden, a very small village with a long tradition of skiing Champions like Ingemar Stenmark, Anja Person, Jens Bygmark... When you come there everywhere you can see has the logo of Tarnaby Ski Gymnasium. In the local shops, they are selling shirts, hoodies, and hats. Memorabilia and trophies are exposed on visible places, and that is making a huge difference in creating the emotion and connecting with the institution in this case Tarnaby Ski Gymnasium.

Finland athletes and parents don't connect with the institution but more with the person, in this case the Coach." (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

The Club coach says that they have their ways. They present their programs on their ski resort two times a year when the season opening and closing happen. They are also active in sending emails to new potential customers, as well organizing camps for skiers outside their own team to show them a higher level of expertise.

"When we are talking about social environment and its influence on young athletes we are coming to the most important point of the future progress of the kid not just in sport but also in life, developing his abilities to be dedicated, hardworking honest and compassionate. Social environment is one of the most important factors for the whole club". (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

The Head coach of the club is providing 5 crucial pointers

1. The culture of the club, the way of working with the people, the way of treating people or solving problem situations – they are all important.
2. Group spirit among the athletes - Alpine skiing is an individual sport trained in a groups so te group spirit, friendship, wellbeing are the key factors.
3. Interaction between coaches and athletes, mutual trust, general mood make another key factor. In some cases (best cases) the coaches become as extra parents, trusted adults.
4. Interaction between coaches and parents is important. *"Parents pay the costs, make final decisions, so building good relationships and keeping an ongoing interaction with them is basically a necessity, even it may often be quite painful for most of the coaches"* (*Interviewee 2, The Head coach of the Club*).

Summing up, in the context of attractiveness for young athletes, the Sports organizations should become more mindful of their facilities and surroundings when they first approach a young athlete: a clean, well-organized, professional and welcoming approach whereby all facilities are shown, all staff members and trainers introduced, and all services explained will increase young athlete's confidence and build a positive image of the organization.

Currently, the introduction processes occur spontaneously, and do not follow any particular structure. Physical environment particularly affects employees, as they typically spend more time on and around training grounds. On Alpine ski gymnasium level, many coaches have same dormitory arrangements as young athletes do. Improving their living conditions and the physical environment where they spend leisure time would keep them relaxed and energized for long working days.



When travelling, Alpine ski team and Alpine ski schools should be mindful of accommodation arrangements they book. Living on the road, constantly traveling from one ski race to another, packing and unpacking vehicles, personal bags, equipment points to how much tangible physical environment affects day-to-day operations of both employees and athletes, and undoubtedly affecting their performance.

Personal cars, transportation options such as equipment vans and mini-buses, well-equipped gyms, high-quality and well-designed food courts, will positively reflect on brand image these organizations exhibit. Besides trainings or schooling, race organizing and open ski days are services most of the Alpine ski organizations execute regularly. If organized well, they present an opportunity to interact with the general public, parents of athletes and build positive brand image.

### 6.3.2 Analysis of Services in Relation to People and Emotions

As discussed in the literature review, emotions in sports are a big element in achieving success. When we talk about emotions mostly we think as relations, one very important thing:

“Relation between children and coaches, and coaches themselves, is a great environment to work!” (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

One other very important thing is the relation between the Head Coach and the Board, this relationship takes a lot of time and effort:

“People on high positions like board members, presidents of the club etc. do not always know what they are doing, they might be CEOs in their own companies but they miss the knowledge in the sport, so here often can come to misunderstandings connected to the development and the program for young athletes.” (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

Even before joining their ranks, parents, kids and young adults form opinion due to Alpine ski organization social media activity, word-of-mouth, advertising and general emotional value their brand name carries.

Similarly, coaches seek employment or avoid different organizations based on their reputation. Servicescape of all four organization (discussed in CSA) and the two organization where the coaches work (discussed here, for the Proposal building) include much more than the built physical environment in which young athletes and employees operate. Trainers' appearance, behaviour and especially emotional attachment to the

organization they represent, will affect young athlete's in their desire to remain in the sport or leave it.

The impact of success on these aspects on the emotional and social environment are really big, in both positive and negative directions. Based on the respondents, people stay/come to the club because of the professional work and past results, but also because of the team spirit. In conjunction the amiable aspects in the club, the SSF coach points out to the answers given before:

“That for sure, the most successful teams place emphasis on creating a positive social atmosphere but is highly based on personal chemistry and personal touch not on the culture that it maybe should be.” (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

Answer about that topic was very profound from the Club coach who sees big importance in creating a positive atmosphere so he answers in this way:

“That is the goal all the time, but still we have a lot to do. We have to remember that atmosphere is not a separate thing. It's all about people - coaches' athletes and parents together - **I would say that coaches have the biggest role and impact but also the main responsibility**. When there are a lot of people and a lot of people change (come new athletes with their parents, and older athletes move on with their parents), there are also challenges and problems – and those can't be avoided - so it is a lot about **how to solve them, what are the common rules and standards** etc. But to make good rules, standards, and routines, to find good people – it is a nice dream but a difficult task. Building good atmosphere is currently one of the main goals of the club - development of clear rules, tools and standards (create stability, even if people change), educating coaches, improving of communication are all the actions to reach the final goal. Negative atmosphere eats energy - from everyone- and makes you lose focus. You can see it also in the results.” (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

On the club level, ad-hoc feedback sessions between trainers and parents may occur anywhere from ski slopes and club grounds to the nearby parking lots or phones. Implementing planned and structured feedback sessions among clubs and schools would improve perception of their corporate brand among parents. The way trainers develop their relationships with young athletes is paramount to the success of club.

Best trainers are those passionate about serving their customer – the young athletes, and their actions are characterized by professionalism and compassion towards athletes, co-workers, parents and general public. When coaching, as a service delivery, is done towards over-crowded groups of young children at Alpine ski club level, or towards elite young skiers during intense travelling schedules and harsh winter conditions, these service delivery values are often weakened.

When it comes to judging the organization, both coaches have the same answer they wished to be judged by results, since they both believe in their work and they think that results show if the team is successful or not. On the other hand, there are more things that actually they would like to be judged by:

“Professionalism. But to be judged by that, for that is important to be committed to the program, to have common goals and a future prospective.” (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

“Coaching on top level is very important and is a demand this days, is important that the stakeholders feel good and that the athletes are treated well that they feel that is taken good care of them. Do the athletes develop in the system do they have the opportunity to develop, and also one very important thing do we keep skiers healthy – why or why not?” (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*)

Thus, there are plenty of things that would influence the stakeholders, but the main thing is the result and how to come to this result (for which the organization of all year around program, quality coaching, and mutual goals were considered especially important). It is also necessary “to communicate to the customers that skiing is still fun if you do not become a world champion, you can as well enjoy the sport and make it in that way more attractive to young kids” (*Interviewee 2, the Head coach of the Club*).

The biggest problems is related to the lack of good visibility: a lot of things have been done but they are not exposed as they should be.

“Biggest problem is the lack of communication, the customers in this case parents, are not informed in everyday operations, but they don’t see the extra work behind the curtain, so they are not able to comprehend the amount of work that has been done for their children.” (*Interviewee 1, the National team coach*)

Alpine ski organizations should remember that servicescape lives in every interaction with athletes or their parents, and directly affects how the whole organization is being portrayed. Alpine ski teams yield the very best athletes. They achieve international success, and as a result may become transformational figures for the sport: as role models they motivate youth participation both on amateur and professional level, increase awareness and popularity of the sport among general public, and attract sponsorships deals. Currently, among case organizations and in Finnish Alpine ski world, such role model figures are missing.

#### 6.4 Improvement Proposal: Summary

This section merges together the key findings of CSA and portrays a Proposal for Improvement to serve the organizations in their attempt to tackle key weaknesses indicate through Current state analysis.

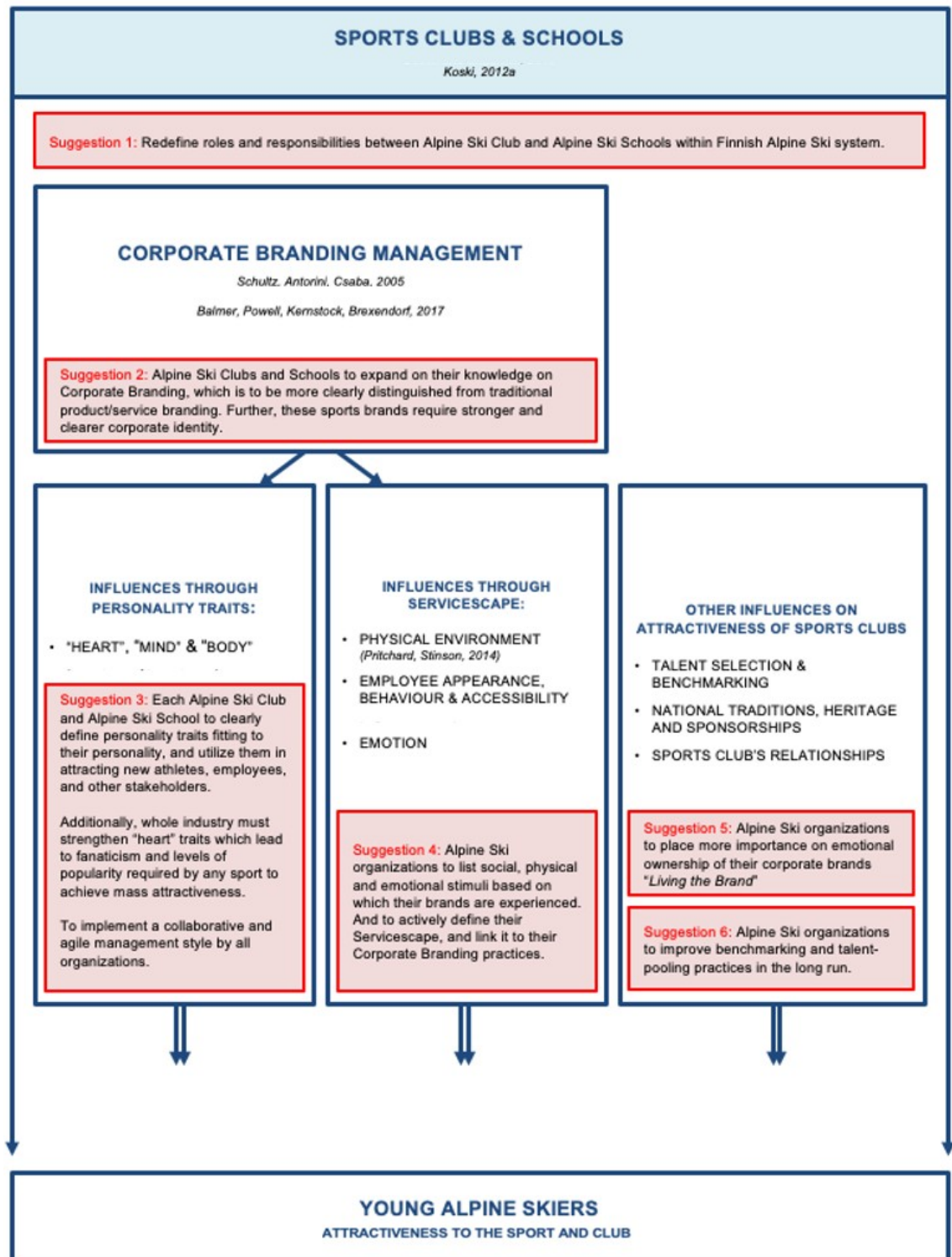


Figure 9: Proposal Draft for Improvement (merged with Conceptual framework of the study).

Visible from Figure 9 presented below, the Proposal for Improvement Draft is visually presented through the previously portrayed Conceptual framework of this study (Figure 6, Section 4). The elements of the Proposal are discussed below.

#### 6.4.1 Proposal Element 1: Improvement Suggestions Related to Redefining the Roles

With declining results on international competition stage, and a worrying drop in the total number of young professional athletes, Finnish Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools could improve on several fronts in order to improve their attractiveness toward young skiers.

On one side, sports clubs should improve on their overall corporate brand management; while on the other, these organizations should recognize that there are other influences outside the scope of corporate brand management which, too, influence their attractiveness.

Therefore, before diving into multiple (corporate branding) influences on young Alpine skiers, there are general improvements needed in the sphere of Alpine skiing in Finland; namely, it is suggested that the National system needs re-evaluation. Whereby roles and responsibilities of Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools would be (re)defined and strengthened. Talent selection practices to be re-examined; age-grouping of young athletes to be more consistently implemented, etc.

#### 6.4.2 Proposal Element 2: Improvement Suggestions Related to Servicescape: Physical Environment, People and Emotion

This part focuses on formulating and addressing Servicescape-related weaknesses indicated in Sections 5 Thesis work. This section will propose improvement suggestions to a) Physical Environment, b) People and c) Emotions, as well as connect to the ideas based on Servicescape knowledge from literature.

One of the key suggestions for sports clubs is to categorize their stakeholder environment, i.e. understanding who is whom and what roles they play in relation to their clubs. Conducting this exercise first, would motivate the beginning of another, larger process – *mapping of the Servicescape* of each of these Alpine ski organizations. But more than that, they would be identifying the influence of *tangible and intangible cues* on athletes. Through the management of their servicescape, the four case organizations would better understand their physical surroundings, such as club and school facilities, meeting rooms, gyms, dormitory and accommodation facilities, as well as their coaching staff and their appearance, behaviour, service delivery style etc.

With this Thesis, it is suggested that case organizations would improve their immediate physical environment by *enhancing the functionality, aesthetics, interior and exterior design of club premises*. Employees would receive higher quality accommodation compared to athletes; development meetings with parents would take place in standardized, well thought-through conditions; ski races would be organized with local community in mind, whereby appearance of trainers and athletes is more carefully managed, to achieve greater levels of interaction with general public. Choice of hotels while on the road, transportation vans and mini-buses would be mindful of trainers' and athletes' needs and comfort.

#### 6.4.3 Proposal Elmet 3: Improvement Suggestions Related to Personality Traits

Case organizations should further seek to understand *the social and emotional* stimuli which affect young athletes, parents and colleagues when experiencing the Alpine ski club/school brand. One respondent, Alpine Ski Club Director, suggests listing social, physical as well as emotional stimuli based on which their clubs are experienced, and portraying them to their staff members, hence making them aware of all aspects of service delivery toward athlete, parents or general public. Such awareness is the first step towards achieving *emotional ownership* of the brands these four organizations represent.

As the Director of Alpine Ski Gymnasium suggests, *emotional ownership* should be achieved *among all stakeholders* involved – young athletes, parents, fans, and employees of their Ski School. That was one of the key suggestions towards creating a stronger emotional ownership towards the sport and the club among existing and future athletes, their parents, fans, and employees.

However, *social interactions, physical and emotional experiences* are often forgotten or disregarded in the process of service delivery toward young athletes. By training employees in the complexities of their roles and raising understanding of the consequences of their attitude and behaviour, managing Servicescape would also mean managing the emotional attachment all stakeholders develop towards their clubs. This emotional attachment, which potentially sometimes leads to true fanaticism and benefits the popularity of the sport, can only come if sufficient attractiveness for participation in the sport exists.

As attractiveness of Ski Clubs and Schools must be improved, one of the suggestion from participants is maximizing success stories of active Alpine Skiers, which would help engage general public and attract more participants. This emotional bond will further be hopefully strengthened by success of Finnish Alpine skiers on the international stage as new national sports icons arise.

#### 6.4.4 Proposal Element 4: Improvement Suggestions Related to Other Influences

Through this exercise, sports clubs would be answering the question such as “*what are the characteristics of our relationships?*” and “*what do our stakeholders expect of us as an organization?*”, as Schultz, Antorini, Csaba (2005:26) explain.

Here, the key suggestion was that Alpine ski organizations should keep in mind the definition of the word ‘sport club’. A sports club is not something that physically exists, but it is a *construct* of *heritage* and *loyalty*. Heritage cannot be achieved without a *strong corporate brand*; and loyalty can only come from the past, present and future club members of the club, its supporters, athletes, employees. Thus, their souls and hearts must be won.

Finally, sports clubs should take notice of *Living the Brand* phenomenon. Specifically, sports clubs could manage their day-to-day interactions with athletes and staff in a way to build *emotional ownership* towards their club. That level of relationship-building would allow for sports clubs to more effectively achieve a positive reputation. Especially in the eyes of young athletes.



## 7 Validation of the Proposal

This section reports on the results of the validation stage and points to further developments to the Proposal. At the end of this section, the final proposal and recommendations are presented.

### 7.1 Overview of the Validation Stage

The Current State Analysis summarized the following key weaknesses among Alpine ski organizations: (1) Finnish Alpine ski system is characterized by a lack of collaborative common strategy between ski clubs and ski schools; (2) Clubs do not leverage corporate branding with the servicescape and as their brand remains not directly linked with servicescape; (3) There is a lack of corporate brand management on Alpine ski club and school level; (4) Alpine ski youth talent is not sufficiently managed, resulting in high drop-out rates of young athletes from the sport, as well as poor attractiveness of the Alpine ski schools for new athletes.

The Proposal was built to address these weaknesses that was founded on the logic of Conceptual framework of this study (presented in Section 4). Through various areas within corporate brand management (such as Personality Traits and Servicescape), and various areas outside corporate management (such as talent selection, as well as national traditions, sponsorship and relations), sports clubs influence attractiveness to the sport and clubs. Therefore, the proposal addressed key weaknesses among the case organizations, and proposed suggestions for improving some of the key areas.

The validations of these six key suggestions for improvement was conducted over face-to-face interviews in two rounds. First, the main 4 weaknesses identified in CSA were discussed with two representatives from Italy, the top executives of the Alpine Ski Gymnasium in Italy. In the second round, two more representatives were asked in more detail about the Servicescape and personality traits, as these were identified as especially important in the proposal. These two representatives includes the Technical Director of the biggest Italian Ski Academy and the Italian coach. (Italian respondents were involved into validation since the researcher has left Finland by the time of completing this study and the respondents representing the initial case organizations were unavailable for remote interviewing).

In both rounds, firstly, respondents were briefed on the Thesis content, as well as key concepts such as Corporate Branding, Servicescape and Personality traits. This was followed by a brief discussion on the case organizations, the findings from the current state analysis, and then the respondents were asked for improvement suggestions from their point of view (drawing on comparison between the case organizations and their own organizations which operate according to the same model). Secondly, the initial Proposal was discussed in detail. Thirdly, respondents were asked for feedback on the Proposal and their suggestion how to further develop it.

## 7.2 Findings from Validation (Data Collection 3) and Further Developments to the Proposal

It should be noted, prior presenting findings of Validation data, that respondents do not face a similar share in participation in the sport among young athletes, nor they see a need to increase the popularity and attractiveness of Alpine skiing in their ski system, as their Finnish counterparts identified. Italy is a ski nation of strong heritage, obvious proximity to the Alps, and there is not a shortage of highly successful young professional athletes.

With all this delimitation in mind, the respondents were still very positive about contributing with their feedback and suggestions to the study. They were able to associate themselves with many of the key issues identified in this study. And otherwise (with the exception of this specific difference in sport's popularity between Finland and Italy) they deemed the weaknesses as quite general to the Alpine ski systems around the world.

First, the respondents see high value in *refining the roles and responsibilities* between Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools/Gymnasiums. Even in their systems, they are faced with the very same challenge, characterized by miscommunication and lack of coordination between organizations catering to young athletes of different age groups.

Further on, drawing a line between the Italian Alpine ski system to that of Finnish respondents, respondents recognize *corporate brand identity* (besides success of individual skiers) to be the most diversifying factor among various Alpine ski clubs and schools. Structured as business organizations, their clubs see dedicated marketing budgets aimed at building a successful brand. They reference ski tourism destinations

as an important component in this process (for instance, international recognition of Cortina d'Ampezzo as a ski resort and positive brand image it enjoys automatically spills over into the brand strength of the Alpine Ski Club operating there).

Furthermore, respondents strongly agreed that such elements of servicescape as *employee appearance, management style, behaviour* are a crucial component in the business of Alpine ski clubs. Surprisingly, the management of *physical environment*, as a part of Servicescape, was not seen as a priority in service delivery and as such a strong factor in customer satisfaction.

Also, the respondents argued that, due to the nature of service delivery in Alpine skiing (where employees, parents, and young athletes are all frequently on the go and generally spend a lot of time in the mountains, on ski slopes) there is *no one or several exact points of contact* (such is the case in offices, stores, shops or restaurants) between them and stakeholders. While they acknowledge that school dormitories, facilities, and training ground should look attractive and function well, they did not recognize them as important in the actual attractiveness of a ski club.

On the other hand, *Personality traits* were regarded as highly important in corporate brand management of Alpine ski clubs. Respondents repeatedly drew comparison lines with Italian football clubs and their fans, whereby heritage, strong values and loyalty are highly regarded in identifying their personality. While Italian ski system does not experience a lack of personality traits among the clubs, much like the Finnish system, it is characterized by *a lack of collaborative and agile management style* among its organizations. Hence, improvement suggestion no. 3 of the Proposal Draft was supported in its entirety.

Table 4 below shows all key findings of Data Collection 3 as a part of validation process.

Table 4. Key findings of Data Collection 3 as a part of Validation Process (1<sup>st</sup> round of validation).

KEY WEAKNESS 1	1. FINNISH ALPINE SKI SYSTEM IS CHARACTERIZED BY A LACK OF COLLABORATIVE COMMON STRATEGY BETWEEN SKI CLUBS AND SKI SCHOOLS
PROPOSAL	<b>Suggestion 1:</b> Redefine roles and responsibilities between Alpine Ski Club and Alpine Ski Schools within Finnish Alpine Ski system.

VALIDAION COMMENTS	<i>“Each system is different. Ski Clubs and Ski Schools don’t need to have a common strategy or collaborate – if they are all doing their jobs, which is bringing more professional skiers to international races. Some skiers choose to rely on individual trainers, their parents and private funding – and have nothing to do with the system. And become very successful. Of course, if we look at big numbers, and adding more skiers to each age group, then it helps that Federations bring all clubs, schools and team under the same agenda.” (R.Buzzi)</i>
KEY WEAKNESS	2. THERE IS A LACK OF CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT ON ALPINE SKI CLUB AND SCHOOL LEVEL
PROPOSAL	<b>Suggestion 2:</b> Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools to expand on their knowledge on Corporate Branding, which is to be more clearly distinguished from traditional product/service branding. Further, these sports brands require stronger and clearer corporate identity.  <b>Suggestion 5:</b> Alpine Ski organizations to place more importance on emotional ownership of their corporate brands “Living the Brand”
VALIDAION COMMENTS	<i>“For some years now, we have seen the importance of our club’s brands. If you are not acting like a modern company and doing all marketing things which modern companies do, then you will no longer be relevant. We sometimes feel like today branding of our services, people, club, destination is even more effective than the good quality we do. So, we try hard to tell people our values, our qualities and be different from clubs. So we develop this relationship with everyone from kids to trainers or parents. From this perspective, corporate branding is very important.” (M. Lazzaro, R. Buzzi)</i>
KEY WEAKNESS	3. CLUBS DO NOT LEVERAGE CORPORATE BRANDING WITH THE SERVICES-CAPE AND AS THEIR BRAND REMAINS NOT DIRECTLY LINKED WITH SERVICESCAPE.
PROPOSAL	<b>Suggestion 3:</b> Each Alpine Ski Club and Alpine Ski School to clearly define personality traits fitting to their personality, and utilize them in attracting new athletes, employees, and other stakeholders.  Additionally, whole industry must strengthen “heart” traits which lead to fanaticism and levels of popularity required by any sport to achieve mass attractiveness.  <b>Suggestion 4:</b> Alpine Ski organizations to list social, physical and emotional stimuli based on which their brands are experienced. And to actively define their Servicescape, and link it to their Corporate Branding practices.
VALIDAION COMMENTS	<i>“Yes, we understand the personality traits. To some extent they are important when attracting new athletes, but I do not think they are shown so much. They are more visible once kids join our club, and trainers become employed. But passion – and yes, also fanaticism like we see in football here – is important to keep the kids joining and wanting to join. But we cannot control it much. It’s part of history, success, traditions. On the other hand, we can control things that we do – trainings, meetings, events, marketing, races, etc. We see the point that if things and places looks nice and make sense, then they function better and give better results. We are not so sure how much we have influence them in ski environment. We suggest you educate clubs on all these things, make us open our eyes to things which are maybe in front of us but we have not seen. We often don’t have time to think about how we dress in the morning, or if the school canteen could be cleaner. But we understand that all these small things may be important to make us look better and work better.” (M. Lazzaro, R. Buzzi)</i>
KEY WEAKNESS	4. ALPINE SKI YOUTH TALENT IS NOT SUFFICIENTLY MANAGED, RESULTING IN HIGH DROP-OUT RATES OF YOUNG ATHLETES FROM THE SPORT, AS WELL AS POOR ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE ALPINE SKI SCHOOLS FOR NEW ATHLETES
PROPOSAL	<b>Suggestion 6:</b> Alpine Ski organizations to improve benchmarking and talent-pooling practices in the long run.

VALIDAION COMMENTS	<p><i>"There is a lot of issues around this everywhere we go. And while it seems that best-of-the-best athletes still manage to get to the international races and get recognized, at young ages the talent selection is more difficult. How to improve the system that is the question? How to attract more young athletes and keep them in the sport? We should probably ask them and parents, too." (R.Buzzi)</i></p>
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As seen from Table 4, improvement suggestion for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> key weaknesses were recognized as the weakest, since respondents were of the opinion that such claim should be researched and confirmed among ex-athletes, drop-out athletes, active athletes and their parents.

Additionally, the Technical director and the coach were asked separately on Personality traits and Servicescape, touching also upon Talent Management, as these parts were not covered well in the 1<sup>st</sup> validation round. The results are collected below.

<b>1<sup>st</sup> WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS, in PERSONALITY TRAITS</b>	
<p><i>Lack of passion. Many persons working are taking this job as a normal job. Working in sport needs passionate people to contribute to success: "LACK OF STRONG "HEART" TRAITS WHICH WOULD LEAD TO FANATICISM AND POPULARITY REQUIRED BY THE SPORT"</i></p>	
KEY SUGGESTIONS	<p><b>Suggestion 3b:</b> No contracts for life, coaches cannot have a lifetime contract because they need to be innovative and agile.</p> <p><b>Suggestion 3c:</b> Employ young people full of passion and motive to prove their value</p>
VALIDATION COMMENTS	<p><i>"You must look at it from both sides, it is important to have coaches and staff on longer contracts because they can feel safe for their job, and once a team is set is not good to change a lot. We need experienced people to lead the whole Academy and those people are usually longer time on their positions. At the same time, we need young coaches. So, a combination of both is maybe a good solution" (by The Technical Director)</i></p> <p><i>"I agree I am personally younger and I like to work with younger coaches we understand each other better, but there are also older coaches who are 60 plus but full of passion for work and incredibly motivated I think is a state of mind" (by the Coach)</i></p>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> KEY WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS, in SERVICESCAPE</b>	
<p><i>Emotional key weakness: "EMOTION NOT YET USED AS ONE OF THE CORPORATE BRANDING PILLARS TO ELEVATE THE SPORT OF CLUB IMAGE"</i></p>	
KEY SUGGESTIONS	<p><b>Suggestion 4b:</b> Construct a more positive image trough social media.</p> <p><b>Suggestion 4c:</b> Spend more work on talent management and recruitment but not just of talented athletes but also of talented coaches.</p>
VALIDATION COMMENTS	<p><i>"In lack of good results the system must work to recruit youngsters in the sport and make them this sport attractive to them"</i></p> <p><i>"So here comes in use social media showing the best of our sports sun ski snow amazing panoramic views this is our leverage that we can use on Social media pointing out the healthy life and the amazing outdoor possibilities of our sport" (by the Technical Director)</i></p>
from	<p><i>the Technical Director of the biggest Italian Ski Academy and the Italian coach</i></p>
from	<p><i>the Technical Director of the biggest Italian Ski</i></p>

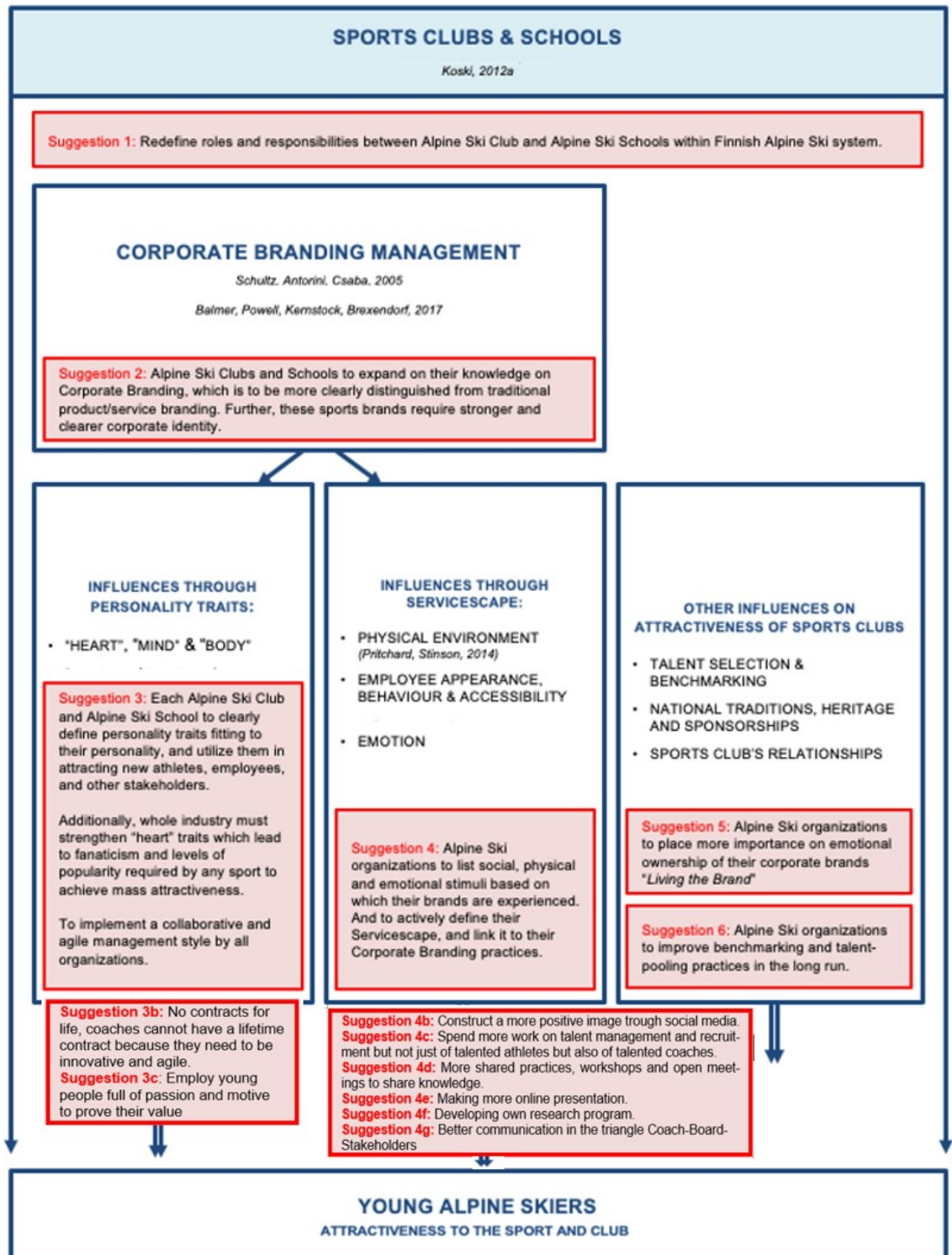
Academy and the Italian coach	<p><i>“The coaching systems must try to make the sport fun for young athletes”</i></p> <p><i>“Coaches need to recognize the young talents and need to take care of them and develop them slowly” (by the Coach)</i></p>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> KEY WEAKNESSES FROM CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS, in SERVICESCAPE</b>	
Lack of communication and interaction, silo mentality: <i>“CLUBS DO NOT ARTICULATE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ENOUGH, NOR THEY USE THEM ENOUGH IN RECRUITING PRACTICES AND ATTRACTING TALENT”</i>	
KEY SUGGESTIONS	<p><b>Suggestion 4d:</b> <i>More shared practices, workshops and open meetings to share knowledge.</i></p> <p><b>Suggestion 4e:</b> <i>Making more online presentation.</i></p> <p><b>Suggestion 4f:</b> <i>Developing own research program.</i></p> <p><b>Suggestion 4g:</b> <i>Better communication in the triangle Coach-Board-Stakeholders</i></p>
<p>VALIDATION COMMENTS</p> <p>from</p> <p><i>the Technical Director of the biggest Italian Ski Academy and the Italian coach</i></p>	<p><i>“Communication is a common problem in many sports not just in ours; we developed an intranet system where all the information’s are available to our stuff and the stakeholders. They can enter and see how the athletes are performing in school and training”</i></p> <p><i>“Still the main communication is happening face-to-face and this part is very important we are all the time encouraging our coaches to speak with the athletes and their parents so that they would be aware what are our plans and that they feel we are taking care of them”</i></p> <p><i>Workshops are a great thing to communicate one example in this Corona time we are having online meetings 2-3 times per week and I can confirm that they are very useful and we will continue to make them after the pandemic finish” (by the Technical Director)</i></p> <p><i>“Communication and team spirit is very important I am a coach in a huge team with many different coaches, and it everything starts with us. We need to agree first and create positive emotions so that athletes could feel the same, but is not always easy many different opinions so I totally agree that the interaction and communication has a huge impact of team development” (by the Coach)</i></p>

Also, both validation discussions pointed to the differences which arise when applying key improvement suggestions to Alpine ski systems outside Finland. Each system is characterized by unique dynamics, rules, and historical backgrounds. Furthermore, each Alpine ski club or school differs in management philosophy, style and identity.

However, the respondents gave their suggestions as they believed them to be useful for improving most of the Alpine ski schools and clubs branding practices, and further recognized that attracting new young athletes should be on everyone’s agenda in this industry.

### 7.3 Final Proposal

After summarizing all suggestions for further developments from validation, the final proposal looks like this:



## 8 Conclusions



This section summarizes the Thesis results and reflects on its objective vs. the outcomes. It reports on the research method, results of the current state within the case organizations, and reports the improvement proposal yielded by this study.

## 8.1 Executive Summary

This study looked into the influences which corporate brand management has on the sports clubs attractiveness to young athletes. This way, this Thesis merged two passion subjects for the researcher personally, Alpine skiing and organizational management of sports clubs.

Since mid 2000s, practitioners have pointed to the lack of appropriate branding practices among professional sports clubs, while simultaneously identifying corporate brands as a 'hot topic'. This Thesis explored the challenges of brand management within professional sports clubs of Alpine skiers in Finland on the example of 4 clubs. The purpose of this study was to propose improvements to the branding practices of these sports clubs with the aim to increase their attractiveness to young athletes.

To this end, this Thesis defined the concept of corporate branding, placing it in the context of sports clubs. Consequently, this Thesis examined corporate brand management practices on the example of four Alpine ski clubs in Finland. To understand the relationship between corporate branding and its effects on being attractive to young elite skiers, this study explored the experiences and views of several clubs' representatives, from middle or top management who are all closely engaged with the development of young athletes. This is achieved through the usage of in-depth interview method. This Thesis relied on interviewing (done with four case organizations belonging to Finnish Alpine Ski system), and used Content Analysis to draw conclusions from them. It further merged this data with suggestions from literature and best practice on corporate branding in order to increase attractiveness of sports clubs.

The Current state analysis revealed that Finnish Alpine Skiing world is seeing a high drop-out rate of young skiers on the verge of progressing from Alpine Ski Clubs onto Alpine Ski Schools. At the same time, these Alpine Ski Schools (boarding schools and Gymnasiums) are in fact the strongest pillar of Finnish Alpine Skiing as they successfully nurture and develop talent. However, there is not enough talent to manage. Current state analysis also showed that very few skiers become part of Alpine Ski Schools, powerful enough to enlarge the elite talent pool among young skiers. Current state analysis placed focus on corporate branding practices and found them to insufficiently



managed, particularly in the sphere of servicescape and personality traits concepts. Further on, the case organizations seem to predominantly focus on traditional branding and marketing practices.

In contrast, the Current state analysis revealed there is a good foundation in place for successful corporate branding among case organizations. Their relationships are built and nurtured through employees, with ongoing discussion and feedback system between coaching staff on one side, and customers (parents, athletes) on the other. Indeed, results showed that majority of the respondents believe that corporate branding practices of their organizations have a direct impact on the attractiveness of their clubs to young athletes.

Merging the findings obtained through both existing literature and current state analysis, resulted in a Proposal for improvements. The study outlined several improvement suggestions, among which are those related to the role of personal traits and servicescape, as well as the roles of emotions for the corporate brand that result in attractiveness of the sport overall, as well as that of sports club of in young athletes.

When forming opinion on a specific sports club, young athletes are influenced through a variety of things. One of which is the power or sports club's corporate brand and club's level of success in managing it. Specifically, this Thesis finds, the attractiveness of the sports club in the eyes of young athletes is influenced through the concept of Personality Traits as well as the concept of Servicescape. However, implementation of corporate branding strategies and relevant daily practices remains predominantly overlooked by Alpine ski clubs in Finland. The findings of this Thesis should help to improve attractiveness of Alpine ski clubs to young skiers. The results should also provide insights into the influence of corporate branding and its effects on young skiers' choices.

## 8.2 Managerial Implications / Next Steps and Recommendations toward Implementation

The formulated recommendations of this Thesis should enable Alpine ski clubs in Finland to gradually start increasing their attractiveness to young skiers. The process of introducing a higher degree of corporate branding to Alpine Ski Clubs and Schools in Finland, should start with two actions.

First, Alpine Ski organizations must answer these two questions, adopted from Schultz et al. (2005:231): “*Are you ready to incorporate corporate branding processes in your long-term strategies, or are you sticking to a traditional marketing perspective?*” and “*Do you know who you are as an organization – as in, do you have a realistic perception of your identity, organizational cultures, images, and special competencies?*”.

Answering these question will help organizations determine at what stage of readiness to implement corporate branding-related changes they truly are.

Second, assuming there is readiness to implement such change, organizations should put the proposal into practice by either *taking ownership* of it internally or seeking assistance from outside agency in the form consultancy. In either scenario, corporate branding will put their employees in the epicentre of any process.

As a starting point, this Thesis suggests to take up the actions proposed in this study, namely: (a) mapping out the organization’s stakeholders, (b) defining its services & Servicescape and (c) dedicating clear Personality traits to its brand identity.

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## **APPENDIX 1.**

### **Interview questions**

The following questions were posed to the interviewees during **spring 2019**, which were then extended in **summer 2019** (as a part of re-shaping of the study) and then asked separately from coaches in **spring 2020**.

### **INTRO TO THE DISCUSSION ON ALPINE SKI CLUBS ATTRACTIVENESS**

1. In general, what are the key things a ski club should offer to its young athletes?
2. What makes your Sports Club more attractive over some other clubs available to young athletes?

### **CORPORATE BRANDING**

1. How would you evaluate branding of your Ski club?
2. Has branding ever been discussed in your organization? Do you find it relevant?
3. **Do you believe the brand management of your organization has any influence on attractiveness of your club to young skiers?**
4. How do you wish your organization to be judged by its stakeholders (especially young athletes and parents)? Based on what things?

### **SERVICESCAPE**

1. How do you think, does *the physical environment* in which you operate influences the young athletes (as for attractiveness of your club)?
2. Do you feel like your Ski Club/School enjoys added value due from its location, architectural setup, design of internal spaces? What *emotions* they evoke?
3. When recruiting new athletes, where does the negotiation typically take place? What are the spaces for training, dressing, relaxation, socializing etc for young athletes? for the staff?
4. How do you think, does *the social environment* in which you operate influences the young athletes (as for attractiveness of your club)?
5. Do you feel like your Ski Club/School places emphasis on creating amiable social atmosphere? How?

### **PERSONALITY TRAITS**

1. What are the values your Ski Clubs aims to convey to its stakeholders, including young athletes?
2. How would you say your Ski Club presents itself to the public?
3. I will list you 6 different personality traits that could characterize an organization such as yours. Please identify one or more which best resonate with your Ski Club – those that best describe you and your employees during interactions with young athletes.
  - a. Creative
  - b. Passionate
  - c. Agile
  - d. Collaborative
  - e. Compassionate
  - f. Disciplined

### **SPONSORSHIPS AND OTHER INFLUENCING FACTORS**

1. Does your club benefit from sponsorship? state funding?
2. How dependant is your organization on the volunteer work?
3. Do you feel national traditions influence the attractiveness of this sport?
4. Do you feel your talent management influence attractiveness of your sports club?
5. What would you say, what is the type of relationships between your coaches (as your employees) and young athletes and their parents (as your clientele)?

### **IMPROVEMENT SUGGESTIONS**

1. **What would you like to see done differently on a club level, if anything? (especially as for Servicescape? Personality traits?)**
2. What would you change in the system, if you had free hands? (as for the 4 weaknesses from CSA?)
3. TO COACHES: How would you comment these findings?

*1. CLUBS DO NOT ARTICULATE **HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS** ENOUGH, NOR THEY USE THEM ENOUGH IN RECRUITING PRACTICES AND ATTRACTING TALENT*

*2. **EMOTIONS** NOT YET USED AS ONE OF THE CORPORATE BRANDING PILLARS TO ELEVATE THE SPORT OF CLUB IMAGE*

*3. INFLUENCE of **PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT** IS NOT FULLY RECOGNIZED AS IMPORTANT FACTOR IN SERVICE DELIVERY; IS DEPENDENT ON FINANCIAL SUPPORT*

*4. CLUBS DO NOT LEVERAGE CORPORATE BRANDING WITH THE SERVICESCAPE; THEIR BAND IS NOT DIRECTLY LINKED WITH SERVICESCAPE.*

## **APPENDIX 2.**

### **Interview field notes (Example 1 from a coach).**

The following questions were posed to the interviewees during spring 2019 to the top management of 4 clubs; and then further asked from coaches in spring 2020.

#### **INTRO TO THE DISCUSSION ON ALPINE SKI CLUBS ATTRACTIVENESS**

##### **1. In general, what are the key things a ski club should offer to its young athletes?**

Today, it is not enough to provide just high-quality snow training - club activities need to be holistic and year-round in practice on professional level.

(No quality difference to professional athletes)

- a) Snow training - daily training (wintertime) + full camp program.  
- newest knowledge - knowhow about technique -
- b) Year round Dryland training - personal programs - regular testing
- c) Mental training - guidance to basics from early years
- d) Guidance to shape & setup of the equipment - checkup system
- e) guidance in athletic lifestyle - food sleep, recovery etc.
- f) school /study integrations – co-operation with schools

The main thing is that the club is constantly developing its activities. Every year the system must be better.

##### **3. What makes your Sports Club more attractive over some other clubs available to young athletes?**

- a) Year-round program - full camp program.
- b) Resources- fulltime coaches - > (question1: actions a-f).
- c) Southern location (most of the people lives in southern Finland).
- d) Big number of skiers that enables: age groups - quality groups -> enough skiers to homogenous training groups - on every level ( same age friends in groups).
- e) Past success (just illusio).

#### **CORPORATE BRANDING**

##### **1. How would you evaluate branding of your Ski club?**

Practice and successful athletes, has been base of the brand. Other branding work has been years the same- but that is not enough anymore. Branding is not important only in Alpine society - because whole sport Alpine Skiing needs more branding in a competition between different sports.

##### **2. Has branding ever been discussed in your organization? Do you find it relevant?**

It has been in agenda as long I remember, but no big changes in practice, and need to do more.

**4. Do you believe the brand management of your organization has any influence on attractiveness of your club to young skiers?**

The ground of the club is ski school, so far success has been good, but without branding activities success won't last forever.

**5. How do you wish your organization to be judged by its stakeholders (especially young athletes and parents)? Based on what things?**

I'm not sure if I understand the question right, our club has four evaluation meters and I think that those cover pretty much:

1. new athletes ( new beginners - from other clubs)
2. continuing athletes (in the club alpine high school)
3. healthy athletes
4. competition success.

Stakeholders decide (judge) with their feet - do they stay or they go, do they find their joy of sport, or not, or do athletes start to work hard /parents invest more or not (as simple as that). So, basically we need to ask:

- is the coaching on top level
- do stakeholders feel good? are the athletes treated well - do they feel that they are cared for
- do the athletes develop in the system / have the opportunity to develop
- do we keep skiers healthy - why, why not
- how many skiers we get to high schools why, why not.

## SERVICESCAPE

**1. How do you think, does the physical environment in which you operate influences the young athletes (as for attractiveness of your club)?**

Camps (environments) are good, but conditions for daily training are poor, if we compare conditions to real alpine skiing countries. Basically only benefits are locations (slopes pretty close to home and enables to live "Helsinki Metropolitan area").

**2. Do you feel like your Ski Club/School enjoys added value due from its location, architectural setup, design of internal spaces? What emotions they evoke?**

Most of the people in Finland live in "Helsinki Metropolitan area" so there is a lot of potential skiers - there is also a lot of people with a lot of money, so the potential is even bigger, Alpine skiing is very expensive sport. System design and its current positive state (progress) added value for sure. The fact that Club has resources and material to build the system -> bring added value.

**3. When recruiting new athletes, where does the negotiation typically take place? What are the spaces for training, dressing, relaxation, socializing etc for young athletes? for the staff?**



There is no one right answer for that. The level and the age of the athlete matters.

The new beginners may come to learn the basics, because the goal is holiday in the alps with the family. Many young skiers join, because skiing is nice hobby and one way to make/keep friends. etc. But when skiers get older the role of coaching, system, old merits get bigger role.

So the basis for motivation varies a lot - from relaxing, spending time with friends to reaching career in alpine skiing - that is one main point to understand in recruiting process - you don't get results without athletes, so the first thing is to get athletes in and start work with them.

Benefit of our club: we can offer different groups, for different athletes (age or level etc).

For staff: coaching is easy to combine to studies, so for most of the people it is short term decision to earn money (pretty ok salary) mainly for old skiers or ski teachers. The passion to coach or get athletes to the top (long distance goals) are unfortunately rare.

#### **4. How do you think, does the social environment in which you operate influences the young athletes (as for attractiveness of your club)?**

Social environment is one of the most important factors for the whole club:

1. The culture of the club, way of working with people, the way of treating people or solving problem situations are all important factors.
2. Group spirit among athletes - Alpine skiing is individual sport trained in a groups so group spirit. Friendship, wellbeing etc. are the key factors.
3. Interaction between coaches and athletes, mutual trust, general mood another key factor- in some cases Best cases) coaches become as extra parents - trusted adult
4. Interaction between coaches and parents.
5. Parents pay the costs, make final decisions- so building good relationships and keep ongoing interaction with them is basically necessary - even its quite often pain in the ass for most of the coaches.

The impact of the success on social aspects (1-4) of the social environment are really big - in both positive and negative directions.

People stay/come to club because of the professional work, results but also because of the state of atmosphere - club need to be place, where is good to be.

#### **5. Do you feel like your Ski Club/School places emphasis on creating amiable social atmosphere? How?**

That is goal all the time, but still a lot to do. We have to remember that atmosphere is not separated thing. Its all about people - coaches athletes and parents together - I would say that coaches has the biggest role and impact, and also responsibility. When there are a lot of people and a lot of people change (come new athletes with their parents, and older athletes move on with their parents), there are also challenges and problems - those can't be avoided- so it is a lot about how to solve them, how are the common rules and standards etc. So Make good rules, standards, routines and find good people - nice dream but difficult task.

Building good atmosphere is currently one of the main goals of the club - development

of clear roles, tools and standards (create stability, even if people change), educating coaches, improving of communication are all the actions to reach the goal. Why -negative atmosphere eats energy-from everyone - and makes you lose focus. You can see it also in the results.

We are also focusing more on the youngest athletes because that is the place to create the ground. With older the changes are more difficult. Growing culture and future need to be started from the bottom.

## PERSONALITY TRAITS

### **1. What are the values your Ski Clubs aims to convey to its stakeholders, including young athletes?**

Values are easily stamped on, so here are the principles that need to reflect in practice:

1. Caring and respect for others, 2. Professionalism and work culture, 3. Quality and safety, 4. Desire to develop and evolve, 5. Passion for sports.

### **2. How would you say your Ski Club presents itself to the public?**

Comparing to other clubs, we are doing Ok, but other clubs are improving, so we need to react. Our goal is to be the world's best Alpine skiing system in club level in 2022 (does not mean we think that we are) and there is a lot of work to do, but also already done - whether it is publicly visible - not very much. Perhaps it would be a good to bring professionalism to the public.

There have been enough companions in the club, so public image enhancement / construction has not been necessary, but in the future it will have to pay attention as competition intensifies.

However, public image today (social media time) is not only about constructing a positive image, but also for preventing disasters and negative image.

**3. I will list you 6 different personality traits that could characterize an organization such as yours. Please identify one or more which best resonate with your Ski Club – those that best describe you and your employees during interactions with young athletes.**

**a. Creative**

**b. Passionate**

**c. Agile**

**d. Collaborative**

**e. Compassionate**

**f. Disciplined**

Creativity and passion is my gasoline (I stop doing this if I lose them). So, naturally I'm doing my best to encourage others in the same direction, but it's still more like a goal

So, if I had to choose two to describe this moment, I would tend to choose: Disciplined, collaborative.

### **SPONSORSHIPS AND OTHER INFLUENCING FACTORS**

#### **1. Does your club benefit from sponsorship? State funding?**

Yes, but the amounts are relatively small

#### **2. How dependent is your organization on the volunteer work?**

Volunteers are big help, but daily work runs without them (except the board)

#### **3. Do you feel national traditions influence the attractiveness of this sport?**

The country's traditions can even be a barrier to attractiveness

#### **4. Do you feel your talent management influence attractiveness of your sports club?**

Influence is Positive, but there is room for improvement.

#### **5. What would you say, what is the type of relationships between your coaches (as your employees) and young athletes and their parents (as your clientele)?"**

Getting to know people, and building a relationship takes time. Challenges arise due to coach turnovers (coaches comes and goes). This affects communication/relationship between coaches and the athlete-coach relationship - and same with the parent.

##### *Coach/coach*

The goal is to keep communication between coaches as open as possible - face to face, encouraging present new ideas, knowledge sharing, challenge of thinking, but the coaching team is young and relatively inexperienced as a whole, so there is plenty of work to do. Still, too much negative atmosphere, while we need more "he is our project" kind of thinking, instead of "this is my project and these are my athletes" thinking.

##### *Coach/parent*

Communication with parents is Ok on informal level but big numbers of athletes mean limited time for speaking for each parent. Younger coaches still need exercise and a little thicker skin - communicating with parents is not always easy.

##### *Coach / Athlete*

This Relationship is Requirement for Success. Direction is right most of the groups of our club, but big number of coach turnovers and shorts coach /athlete relationships has caused damage. If coaches are changing all the time, it's difficult to build good relationship.

### **IMPROVEMENT SUGGESTIONS**

#### **1. What would you like to see done differently on a club level, if anything? (especially as for Servicescape? Personality traits?)**

Commonly shared practices & automated routines. More passion, creativity and agility - and MORE HARD WORK. Simple thing better and better all the time. Clear roles and focus, attention and time to the essentials.

Finland is very small Alpine Skiing country - so more positive and co-operative culture needed - less speaking and complaining and more action and hard work.

**2. What would you change in the system, if you had free hands? (as for the 4 weaknesses from CSA?)**

We are now doing that change work, but few things that are not in my hands now or possible with current resources.

- I would recruit more skilled coaches with passion
- make more flexible calendar - camps etc
- coaching to personal level - dryland, eating, sleeping, technique - more time for each skier
- more co-operation with other teams (Finland & abroad) – speed training
- more experts in use (physiotherapists, psychologists, doctors, other sports, nutrition experts)
- better dryland facilities
- more focus on equipments - tools/equipments for fixing them)
- own research.

3. TO COACHES: How would you comment these findings?

**1. CLUBS DO NOT ARTICULATE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ENOUGH, NOR THEY USE THEM ENOUGH IN RECRUITING PRACTICES AND ATTRACTING TALENT**

True, I guess.

**2. EMOTIONS NOT YET USED AS ONE OF THE CORPORATE BRANDING PILLARS TO ELEVATE THE SPORT OF CLUB IMAGE**

I believe that more and more clubs are trying to express and convey emotions, but perhaps the problem with the implementation and its quality, and the feelings of those being presented, are limited.

Funny, laughs are often portrayed as the fun of training, but when it comes to clubbing that aims at top-level sports, the range of emotions is actually much wider.

The image of clubs is easily a hobby group level - and no professionalism is conveyed.

**3. INFLUENCE of PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT IS NOT FULLY RECOGNIZED AS IMPORTANT FACTOR IN SERVICE DELIVERY; IS DEPENDENT ON FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

Partially agree. Money or the facilities offered by the club /city creates boundaries, and it matters. If there is no money or facilities, it is difficult to operate competitively. If you

don't have a proper training slope, proper gym or other training places situation is difficult of course.

At the same time, I believe that coaches makes difference. Some of them take everything out they can, even the facilities are poor. On the other hand there is coaches with perfect facilities without results.

Poor facilities mean that you need to put a lot of extra energy to make things happened - that time is always away from something else.

**4. CLUBS DO NOT LEVERAGE CORPORATE BRANDING WITH THE SERVICESCAPE; THEIR BAND IS NOT DIRECTLY LINKED WITH SERVICESCAPE.**

Agree.

**APPENDIX 3.****Interview field notes (Example 2 from a coach).**

XX, a coach with 16 years of experience in Finland, ranging from a club to the national team level. Currently, unaffiliated with any specific club/organization, working as a private coach for one of our WC-athletes. (This respondent approached the questions from three different points of view where he has especially strong experience).

**Field notes:**

- A. Ski club
  - o Target audience kids entering at 5-9 years old, active participation generally until the age of 15
  - o Majority of costs covered by parents
  - o Some public funding, some private funding
  - o Volunteer work in high importance both in administration and operational
  - o Participation based on locality and access
  - o 30-100 athletes, 1-3 professional coaches, 5+ part-time coaches 5+ volunteer coaches, parents running administration and logistics
  - o Non-profit
- B. Private children's team
  - o Target audience kids 12-15 years old
  - o Majority of costs covered by parents
  - o No public funding, some private sponsorships
  - o Volunteer work at a lower level than clubs, light administration operational generally fully professional
  - o Participation national or even international, in direct competition with ski clubs. Reputation, results important, considered to be better but more expensive options
  - o 3-8 athletes, 1-2 professional coaches, light administration
  - o For profit
- C. National team
  - o From juniors (16 yo) to World Cup level
  - o Athletes cover roughly 15-20% of total costs, via parents or private sponsorship
  - o Public and private funding high
  - o Due to high total costs of programs, cost burden on parents can be high, especially at lower levels of national team programs where personal sponsorships are low
  - o Professionally administered and operated
  - o Participation based on exclusive access
  - o 8-12 athletes, 8-12 professional coaches, professional administration of 6 people
  - o Non-profit

I'll be segmenting my answers into A/B/C sections where pertaining to a specific organization, and without sectioning when answering generally.

### 8.3 INTRODUCTION

1. Athletic development is the primary goal, and the main offering of all sports organizations. During the very earliest years, it is mostly focused on participation, motivation and learning a multitude of new techniques as well as building a commitment to sports and athleticism. As years go forward the emphasis constantly shifts towards improving racing results.
2. A. Locality. A large majority of athletes choose a club at a young age based on ski school experience at a local hill. From there long-term commitment usually based more on a sense of community for both kids and parents, rather than results.
3. B. The strength of the program and a nationally top-end training group, with high expectations for results.
4. C. A monopoly (real or perceived) on professional sports.

### 8.4 CORPORATE BRANDING

1. A. Brand based on a sense of community. Fairly strong.
5. B. Brand based on a sense of competitiveness, and secondarily exclusivity. Strong but controversial, doesn't necessarily attract a wide audience
6. C. Brand based on elatedness. Recent poor results a major challenge in upholding the brand.
7. A. Not explicitly. The brand is mostly a factor of outside facilities and the culture emerging from participants. Given that most operators are simultaneously customers, most branding activities are not seen as such, but rather communicating values, or political activities.
8. B. Given the light administration, very little discussion. Implicitly branding, while not discussed as such, was a consideration, with emphasis on consistent high focus on sports performance. Exclusivity to high levels of commitment, and resulting controversiality in wide audience meditated.
9. C. Explicitly, with a professional charged with branding. Most branding activity focused towards the public, and sponsors. Branding/affects of servicescaping not seen as important towards athletes, of which more in the end.
10. Yes. Elaborated later
11. Elaborated later

#### 8.4.1 SERVICESCAPE

1. Physical environment is tremendously important, since skiing is an outdoor sport. Equipment storage rooms etc. are not necessarily considered to be a part of the branding, but it probably has a larger effect than considered. Clothing is the only major part where specific branding choices are made.

### 8.5 AFTERWORD

Reading through the questions raised some general thoughts about the service structure of ski clubs and perhaps sporting organizations in general, that I feel better an-

swered in open form. People in sports do not often consider sports through a business framework, even though technically athletes are customers. Ski clubs are in the majority volunteer organizations that hire professional coaches, where the parents and athletes are simultaneously customers and providers. Academies and national teams are professional organizations that generally view sponsors as customers, and athletes as co-producers, even though the view might not be very accurate. A branding, marketing and service engineering framework can be quite powerful to understand some of the problems, and successes in sports organizations.

Compared to regular service industries, the value creation is not as clearly defined. Often sports organizations and athletes measure value creation in athletic success, rather than monetary profit. As such, the athletes and sports organizations are both in the roles of beneficiaries and creators of added value, regardless of financial transactions. However, if we consider a customer as a trifacta of chooser/user/payer, the athlete always fits the two first roles, even when the payer might be public or private sponsorship. The most important goal of a successful branding/servicescape is not necessarily the **recruitment** but **retention and commitment** of the athletes. The athlete's level of commitment and participation is a critical ingredient to success as defined by both the athlete and usually the organization. Since there is a scale of commitment, and the highest levels of commitment create the most value, it is too simplified to think consider it as a simple recruitment problem.

I feel that especially professional organizations at higher levels of sport fail to see the athletes in the role of the customer, towards who to direct a branding and marketing effort, since the payer of salaries is usually not directly the athlete. As such the athlete is considered self-evidently to be part of the organization and commitment is taken for granted, rather than worked for.

A good example is the official dryland training facility, which has been an undertaking by the Olympic committee and the Ski Federation over the last 10 years, which has seen low commitment from athlete's side and low participation. I feel that the problem has been very much a service marketing one, where the athlete has not been recognized as a customer, and as such their **perceived** value has not been considered important.



**APPENDIX 4.**

**Field notes from Validation (Example 1 from an Italian coach).**

**APPENDIX 5.**

**Field notes from Validation (Example 2 from an Italian coach).**