

## **A look into the crystal ball of ski destination development - the role of Alpine Summer Parks**

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### **Abstract**

Recently, winter tourism destinations have developed summer attractions as climate change threatens their success. Increasing the number of summer attractions in ski resorts could also be part of the operators' strategy to adapt to shorter winter and longer summer seasons. Scholarly literature on this evolution is currently limited. This research note aims to close this research gap: first, by examining the relevance of summer tourism at ski resorts and for ski-resort operators; second, by investigating reasons for opening summer attractions and third, by analyzing the impact of summer attractions on climate-induced issues. Two focus groups and one association study were conducted among ski-resort operators to assess why ski resorts invest in summer attractions, specifically Alpine summer parks [ASP] that are branded separately but are typically located in the ski resort. The results show that these attractions are designed to increase visitor numbers in summer and are thus considered an essential element of the summer season. At the same time, while the summer season per se is (still) given little importance, its future potential was emphasized by all respondents. ASPs are seen as part of the future, but not as the future. While climate change was never mentioned in the focus groups, the results of the association study show that climate-induced issues are recognized as a critical challenge for ski-resort operators.

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### **1. Background of research (Introduction)**

Ski resorts are heavily dependent on winter seasons; however, snow cover and pristine mountain landscapes are among the most vulnerable to climate change (UNEP, 2008). Studies reviewed by Steiger et al. (2017) reveal without exception that climate change represents a serious risk to the sustainability and viability of ski resorts around the globe, as natural snow levels continue to fall, reducing the length and increasing the unpredictability of the average ski season. Even if substantial progress is made in snowmaking, many areas would lose their tourist appeal without snow [as] “snow cover is a *conditio sine qua non* for winter sports” (Gössling & Hall, 2006, p. 15). There exists a vast body of literature that deals with impacts related to climate change for ski resorts and/or tourism (e.g., Prideaux et al., 2021; Weir, 2017; Witting & Schmude, 2019; Xie et al., 2020). In this context, Steiger et al. (2017) present an updated picture with two aspects emerging. First, a distinction must be made between the two seasons (Steiger et al., 2017), and second, local climate characteristics have an influence on impacts (Steiger & Scott, 2020). As global warming is unlikely to put an abrupt and devastating end to the ski tourism industry in the Alps (Steiger & Scott, 2020), winter destinations are exploring avenues to remain successful.

While having numerous downsides, climate change also presents new opportunities (Serquet & Rebetez, 2011). Climate-induced consequences are considered less critical for the summer season (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2015). Juschten et al. (2019) find that increased heatwaves in the cities affect urbanites’ quality of life. City-dwellers are adapting their lifestyles and spending more time in nearby rural areas, creating new opportunities for Alpine summer areas. Summer overnight stays in the Alpine Austrian states Salzburg and Tyrol increased from 31.5 million in 2015 to 35.9 million in 2019, reaching 31.6 million in 2021, the first post-COVID-19 summer season (Salzburg government, 2022; Tyrolean government, 2022). Previously neglected by ski-resort operators, summer seasons are gaining relevance by taking over shoulder seasons and attracting new visitor types (Schlemmer et al., 2019).

Climate change, however, is not the only driver of change in ski resorts. The number of winter tourists is shrinking while those remaining have higher expectations regarding experiences (Bausch & Gartner, 2020). Additional pressure stems from increased interest in Alpine summer activities besides hiking and biking, as summer leisure and outdoor-oriented travelers are primarily motivated by sport, activity and nature (Juschten et al., 2020). Furthermore, Alpine summer tourists are diverse and not limited to one activity or sport (Bichler & Peters, 2020). Ski

resorts are thus forced to tackle change on multiple fronts: summer vs. winter and increased diversification.

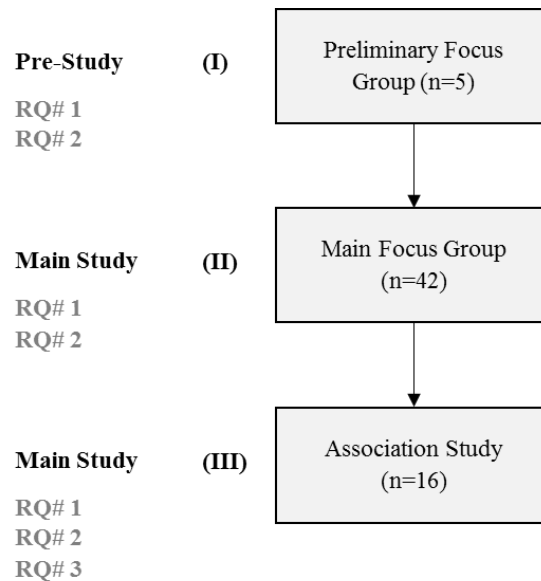
Irrespective of the season, scholarly literature propounds sustainable development and innovative approaches (Pikkemaat et al., 2019) to tackling the challenges ahead while engaging in an ongoing critical discussion about the future of ski resorts (Abegg et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2017; Tjørve et al., 2018). Innovation may be the key (Kuščer & Mihalič, 2016), and indeed pivotal to competitiveness and rejuvenation (Flagestad & Hope, 2001; Paget et al., 2010). A successful response to these challenges could be particularly rewarding post-COVID as demand for sports, outdoor and nature activities near urban centers is increasing sharply (Mata et al., 2021).

Accordingly, an interesting situation has evolved at mountain destinations over the last decade. On one hand, investigations into the stakeholders' perceptions of climate-induced issues reveal that ski-lift operators are not acting with foresight (Abegg et al., 2008; Trawöger, 2014; Wolfsegger et al., 2008). On the other, an arguably innovative development can be observed in the opening of summer attractions; specifically, Alpine Summer Parks [ASP] (Zach et al., 2021). These are commercial leisure areas typically located at the mountain station of the first ski lift in a resort. These parks are themed, but in contrast to conventional theme parks, do not require an entrance fee as visitors can walk there or take a ski lift to reach them. They provide entertainment in the form of water parks, bike trails, educational trails and other unique attractions that expand the ski-lift offering during the summer. Conventional theme parks have already been explored as mountain summer attractions in scholarly literature (i.e., Clivaz et al., 2012; Müller, 2019). Zach et al. (2021) identified firm and destination characteristics that result in the adoption of ASPs; however, their study does not provide insights into the resort operators' motives. Our study aims to close this gap (for more details see supplementary data – Appendix A represents a literature review section).

Thus, this qualitative study seeks to investigate the phenomenon of ASPs in three steps: first, by examining the relevance of summer tourism and ASPs for ski-resort operators (RQ #1). Second, by exploring the reasons (motivations and expectations) grounded in the findings of the Emotion Motivation Attitude Model [EMA Model] (Hsu et al., 2010; based on Gnoth, 1997) for the opening of ASPs (RQ #2). And third, by analyzing the impacts and perceptions of ASPs with a focus on climate-induced issues (RQ #3).

## **2. Material and Methods**

The qualitative multi-method approach included three studies spanning from March 2018 to July 2020. The first was a small preliminary focus group (Study 1; n=5) followed by a second focus group (Study 2). For the purpose of Study 2, representatives from 113 ski resorts in the Alpine region of Tyrol, Austria, were invited and 42 participants attended. In a third step, an association study (Study 3; n=17) was conducted, involving ski-resort operators in Austria, Switzerland and Italy based on the results of Studies 1 and 2. (Study period 03/2018 – 09/2020)



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual framework

A qualitative, explorative research method is highly relevant to gain initial insights into a new phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, a single-case design is appropriate where the examined phenomenon is of a revelatory nature or represents rare or unique circumstances (Yin, 2014). A qualitative single-case study is fitting for our study as we aim to understand ski-resort operators' motives for and concerns when adopting a summer product, essentially the antithesis for their core winter product. Indeed, our study is, to the best of our knowledge, the second study to investigate the innovation of Alpine Summer Parks (Zach et al., 2021). Finally, the number of ASPs is increasing every year (Schnitzer et al., 2019).

### 2.1. Study 1 (explorative focus group): Sample and study context

A preliminary focus group was conducted with five representatives of Tyrolean ski-resort operators that had opened an Alpine Summer Park. The aim of this study was to identify the motives for developing an ASP and its relevance for the resort's success. The results helped

establish a basis for the second focus group (Study 2). Thus, open-ended questions were formulated, e.g.: What motivation drives the opening of ASPs? What are the reasons for opening such parks? What kind of position do ASPs hold in your business? To keep answers and directions as unbiased as possible, researchers deliberately avoided the term ‘climate change’. Indeed, Trawögers’ study (2014) revealed not only the difficult relationship between ski-resort operators and climate change but also that some refused to acknowledge any change.

### *2.2. Study 2 (focus groups): Sample and study context*

Deductive categories derived from literature and the newly generated inductive categories based on Study 1 served as the basis and were merged into one category system. Study 2 comprised four focus groups, each with one representative from eight to ten ski operators (for details see Appendix B). The results of Study 1 were presented to the experts as a basis for discussion. The topics covered were divided into two categories serving as the basis for Study 2: (1) the relevance of summer tourism and ASPs for ski-resort operators (RQ #1), (2) the motivation and expectations regarding the opening of ASPs (RQ #2). The data (Studies 1 and 2) were evaluated using qualitative content analysis (Mayring & Fenzl, 2014) (for more details concerning sample selection/study design for Studies 1 and 2 - see supplementary data Appendix B).

### *2.3. Study 3 (association study): Sample and study context*

To sufficiently answer RQ #3 (The impacts and perceptions of ASPs with a focus on climate-induced issues), an association study was conducted with 17 participants. Respondents completed a questionnaire in writing and alone. Participants were asked to answer the following questions in their own words: a) Why are ASPs important for your resort and your destination?, b) What is the motivation for a ski-resort operator to open an ASP?, c) What are the expectations behind opening an ASP?, d) Do you see climate change as a determining factor for the future of your ski-lifts?, e) In your opinion, how does climate change play a role in the opening and management of ASPs? and f) How will climate change affect your ski-lift company in the future? (for more details on sample selection/study design, see Appendix B).

## **3. Results**

When analyzing the focus group results (Studies 1 and 2), participants were divided into two groups: ski resorts at or below a medium elevation of 1500m; ski resorts including glaciers above a medium elevation of 1500m (see Appendix B). This division was based on Abegg et al. (2015), due to differing local climate characteristics and challenges.

3.1. Results - the relevance of summer tourism and ASPs for ski-resort operators (RQ #1) (Study 1 & Study 2)

In most cases, the overall relevance of summer is considered small. However, this does not hold true for all operators. Some report that summer tourism is already hugely relevant.

*“And in terms of revenue, we have always been very strong in the summer season and we try to strengthen exactly that and our ratio is now 60:40 already.” (Group: <1500)*

Simultaneously, summer is considered less complex.

*“As a company you have to consider that you have much less work in operating summer business. So, if we make 15% of the total revenue (during summer), then that's good. In summer we have four lifts in operation, in winter we have 50 in operation and snowmaking etc.” (Group: <1500)*

Finally, even where resort operators at any elevation are giving more room to the summer season, a summer-only business model is not considered the future of Alpine resorts. Operators are eager to emphasize the importance of winter. Partly, ASPs are only considered capable of surviving because of the winter season.

*“The summer is getting better and better, we always have much more increases in summer than in winter” (Group: <1500)*

*“That's part of the future. That's not the future. With a good winter. So we [the operators] were already counting on the summer, but we can also see that winter is still the driving force, that we can even afford the summer [...]. And we are on the right track, but I can already see a higher growth potential in the summer” (Group: glacier & >1500).*

Overall, ski-resort operators consider ASPs as important and critical investments which are starting to pay off.

ASPs are *“Very important for us because we are a family destination.” (Group: glacier & >1500)*

Starting a business with ASPs: *“Trying, that was 10 years ago. We tried it then, but now I think we have already reached the point where we can continue professionally. It is not for nothing that you invest so much money [...] we are on a path where they say, wow, now the whole thing or the whole scene is slowly paying off.” (Group: glacier & >1500).*

The relevance of ASPs manifests itself in several ways. Appealing to certain customer groups seems impossible without ASPs.

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*“You never motivate a child with 6-7 years to go hiking nowadays’ without offering ASPs” (Group: <1500).*

The time it takes for ski-resort operators to feel the impact of their ASP varies quite considerably. While some had to wait several years, others reported an immediate effect. Furthermore, ASPs are not considered to influence the business model.

*“The basic business model has not changed. It has simply been extended to the summer.”  
(Group: <1500)*

(For more details see Appendix C.)

3.2. Results - Motivation and expectations regarding the opening of ASPs (RQ #2) (Study 1 & Study 2)

The following results answer RQ #2 – the motivations and expectations regarding the opening of ASPs.

**Table 1**

Studies 1 and 2 – Categorization and anchor examples (for further quotes see Appendix C)

Category	Anchor example =<1500	Anchor example >1500 & glacier
Primary motivations for opening ASPs	“The background to this [building ASPs] was that we said, we simply have to revitalize the summer.” “Our goal was to increase turnover and since the ski-lifts are running anyway.” “And that’s where our staging was to make the guests go up to the mountain and enjoy nature. The hotel is exchangeable - the region is not exchangeable.”	
ASPs justify a ‘better’ price	“In the past, almost all main lifts (from the valley to the top) have already operated in summer. But they didn’t make any sales and in the end they had to be operated in order to have an offer. There was the pressure from the region and from tourism. People wanted to go up there, but there was not enough frequency. The price wasn’t really right either. And with the attractions on the mountain you increase the number of guests on the one hand and on the other hand you can justify a better price.”	“You actually have a summer and a winter use of infrastructures on the mountain, which are there anyway. I believe that this is a very important point for us, and I also believe for the others, that certain things that you have anyway are also used in summer. [...] buildings, a storage pond or the ski-lifts themselves, whether it’s hiking trails that you take as trails in winter or bike parks that you use as ski trails in winter.”
A further reason for building ASPs is to give chalets, restaurants, and bars on the mountain a reason to stay open during the summer months	“that ASPs on the mountain, in most cases are supported by mountain restaurants and the real turnover and return is then also achieved through mountain restaurants. There is always enough time and money for a cake or a coffee on the mountain.” ““And regarding the restaurants, it must also be said that of course through the ASPs, the chalets on the mountain, have made an impressive culinary improvement. Moreover, they have built their own attractions, even in front of the chalets. There has simply been a knock-on effect. An impulse.”	
Mountain ski lifts are becoming increasingly complex, leading to growing demand for well-trained and qualified employees who are hard to keep unless they are offered year-round positions	To offer year-round jobs “Is an important reason in itself. We have now year-round employees. This simply has a value for our staff.”	

\*Note: Anchor examples are excerpts highlighting the most important aspects.

### 3.3. Results – Impacts and perceptions of ASPs with a focus on climate change (RQ #3) (Study 3)

To sufficiently answer RQ #3, namely the impacts and perceptions of ASPs with a focus on climate-induced issues, an association study was conducted, representing the following results:

**Table 1**

Study 1b – Categorization and anchor examples

Category	Subcategory	≤1500	>1500	glacier	Anchor example
Are alpine summer parks important for your company and your region?	Yes	5/5	7/7	0/3	"Summer experience worlds are essential for the vacation decision and for the attractiveness of a region."
	No	0/5	0/7	3/3	"ASPs are overvalued. A harmonious overall offer is important."
What is the motivation for a ski resort operator to open an alpine summer park?	Footfall	4/5	6/7	2/3	"Increasing footfall in summer."
	All-year operations	1/5	1/7	1/3	"Year-round operation, annual employees, income throughout the year."
What are the expectations behind opening alpine summer parks?	Footfall and revenue	5/5	7/7	3/3	"Increase in first-time entries, advertising and added value for the destination."
	Residential acceptance	1/5	0/7	0/3	"Acceptance and appeal to the locals."
	All-year operations	1/5	0/7	0/3	"Mountain railway operators become attractive year-round employers."
	Positive	5/5	7/7	2/3	"ASPs: absolutely important in the overall concept of summer tourism."
	Negative	0/5	0/7	1/3	"No longer up to date."
Do you see climate change as a determining factor for the future of your ski lifts?	Yes	5/5	7/7	3/3	"Yes, reason: it is scientifically proven and the effects are already noticeable throughout the year."
	Shifting of the seasons	2/5	3/7	1/3	"Yes, shorter winter season, longer summer season."
	Climate change as an opportunity	1/5	3/7	1/3	"Guests will avoid hot vacation destinations in the future and may "escape" into the cool mountain air."
In your opinion, what role does climate change play in the opening and the management of alpine summer parks?	Important role	1/5	1/7	0/3	"ASPs play an important role."
	Subordinate/Minor role	1/5	0/7	0/5	"Summer adventure worlds are at most a building block in an overall concept."
How will climate change affect your ski-lift company in the future ?	Challenging	1/5	2/7	0/3	"Weather extremes, season start is becoming increasingly challenging."
	Shifting of the seasons	2/5	3/7	1/3	"Longer summer season, shorter winter season."
	Positively	1/7	1/7	1/3	"As a year-round operator, spring and autumn are also very important."

\*Note: anchor examples are excerpts highlighting the most important aspects.

The research shows that participating operators largely attribute a critical role to ASPs. Glacier resorts, however, perceive ASPs as overvalued, but note that they add value to the destination. This could indicate that a differentiated offering of ASPs may be needed for the glacier resorts compared to lower-level areas. For most operators a key reason for opening ASPs is to boost summer footfall. In addition, the participants' statements in the association study suggest climate change is a challenging issue, but one that could lead to new opportunities.

## 4. Discussion and future research

*The relevance of summer tourism and ASPs for ski-resort operators, their motivations and expectations.* Regarding summer tourism, several studies have revealed a lack of positioning for Alpine regions (Egger & Anthamatten, 2013; Muhar et al., 2007). This study shows two

distinct directions: First, in most cases, the summer season's relevance for resort success is currently considered small. Second, irrespective of current relevance, the summer season's future potential is widely accepted. Thus, the question arises as to what role ASPs might play. Our results reveal two trends. First, ski-resort operators mainly see ASPs as an important investment that pays off. ASPs are described as revenue-generating and essential for pleasing stakeholders and residents and for attracting guests. In sum, they are expected to play an important role during the summer season in future, but not now.

This study confirms the relevance of summer tourism for ski-resort operators in the Alps as per Zach et al. (2021). However, as summer tourism currently plays a minor role for ski-resort operators, the importance of ASPs, even as an essential component of summer tourism, is (still) low overall. Nevertheless, ASPs as outdoor summer destinations were well positioned to capture the pent-up demand following COVID-19-related lockdowns. Indeed, summer tourism was gaining in Alpine destinations before COVID-19. In summer 2021, Tyrol's summer overnight stays were 90% of 2019 (Tirol Werbung, 2022), which is a faster recovery than in urban destinations.

*Impacts and perceptions of ASPs with particular focus on climate-induced issues.* Two main findings arose: First, climate change will determine the future of ski-resort operators, and second, there is a shift in seasons (longer summers, shorter winters). Interestingly, climate change issues were not mentioned in the face-to-face focus groups (Studies 1 and 2). In the association study (Study 3), respondents completed the questionnaire in writing and anonymously. All respondents stated that the effects of climate change are proven and noticeable throughout the year. Furthermore, Study 3 also revealed that ASPs allow the 'revival of the mountain' and shifts in seasonal focus are desirable outcomes. This does not support Trawöger's (2014) findings that operators' awareness of climate change is limited and they were failing to act with foresight. This might be explained by a difference in study approach.

Consequently, ASPs might have a long-term future and move beyond the scope of previous measures. However, considering how many hiking or biking tourists are needed to compensate for the revenue generated by a ski tourist and depending on the future scenario (e.g., Witting and Schmude (2019) estimates 2.53 hiking tourists and 2.13 biking tourists will be needed for each skier day lost in the future), ASPs should be seen as a complementary product to the 'ski product', which in past has served as the sole source of income. ASPs are, therefore, not the only solution but are an essential part of such an approach. It is important to remember that not every resort is affected equally by climate change. Accordingly, Müller (2019) concludes that not every winter sports resort is suitable for year-round tourism, and the geographical, topographical, and infrastructural conditions are decisive for its

success. Furthermore, private investors might avoid ski resorts exposed to greater climate change to minimize risk (Steiger & Scott, 2020). This may also hold true for public authorities which often have a stake or have invested in ski resorts (Abegg et al., 2017).

The current positive impact of climate change and changing consumer trends toward more leisure activities on Alpine summer tourism is beneficial for ski-resort operators investing in ASPs. First, rising temperatures, heatwaves and more tropical conditions are giving operators more summer days to operate their ASPs. Furthermore, higher altitude areas with comparably cool climates (Fleischhacker, 2018) can attract urbanites seeking to escape the city summers. Finally, COVID-19-related stay-at-home orders stimulated the desire to spend time in nature, fostering outdoor activities (Mata et al, 2021) that ASPs can capitalize on.

Thus, the phenomenon of ski resorts investing in ASPs as summer attractions is a complex issue driven by multiple forces and addressing several problems, without solving them all. Nevertheless, ASPs offer a short/mid-term solution for ski resorts. Other destination stakeholders might need to adapt policy to create diverse offerings (Bausch & Gartner, 2020; Bichler & Peters; 2020; Schlemmer et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the opening of ASPs and the associated expectations partially reflect the demands of scholarly literature to develop more sustainable destinations. Our study makes a theoretical contribution by offering deeper insights into the development of summer products at ski resorts. To a certain extent, operators are now acting with foresight. Our studies show that managers investing in ASPs often do so with the future in mind. Furthermore, they are aware that climate change is a factor determining the future of ski resorts.

Future research should investigate if the resources required for ASPs make them sustainable only within established ski resorts (Haugom et al., 2021), or if policymakers should encourage dedicated ASPs. As climate change alters the tourism landscape in Alpine destinations, ASPs could ultimately function without ski resorts. As ASPs require a smaller footprint than ski resorts, interest in opening ASPs in areas currently without ski resorts may grow.

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