M.Sc. Thesis in Business & Management
Stockholm School of Economics

At Melting Summits: How do Ski Resorts Transform?

A Comparative Case Study of Privately-owned Ski Resorts in Sweden

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Presentation: Spring 2023

Abstract

The ski industry represents an economic engine in many regional areas across the globe. However, climate change, with rising temperatures and increasing weather variability, is putting the industry at considerable risk. Because of these pressuring circumstances, numerous ski resorts now find themselves at a crucial point, faced with the pivotal decision of whether and how to innovate and transform their offerings. In parallel, there has been a growing recognition in academic literature of the increasing turbulence and complexity of business environments. Thus, scholars are increasingly shifting focus to viewing firms as part of ecosystems where actors depend on each other and jointly create value. Previous literature on ecosystem transformation has predominantly examined firms' internal capabilities for managing change as well as early-to-midstages of ecosystem lifecycles. Consequently, two intriguing research gaps emerge: examining the influence of (1) contextual factors on ecosystem transformation in (2) mature ecosystems, facing the risk of decline. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how contextual factors influence how ski resorts, representing mature ecosystems, transform. This is done through a theoretical lens of business ecosystems, business model innovation, and embeddedness theory. Through a qualitative comparative case study on Swedish privately-owned ski resorts, a total of 26 interviews were conducted. Our findings indicate that contextual factors can have a profound influence on how ski resorts transform. Firstly, we identify two additional factors beyond established theory – *intermediary* and *local identification* – that were found to significantly contribute to a ski resort's transformation opportunities. Secondly, we outline two distinct approaches that differed in seven aspects, where the analysed ski resorts opted for entirely divergent paths. A notable distinction in these mature ecosystems was that established norms and practices from before the transformation had a significant influence on all three phases of the process. Findings from this study contribute to scholars by creating a more holistic understanding of ecosystem transformation through providing novel insights into a firm's context and process in mature stages. Thus, extending insights regarding the full lifecycle of ecosystems. Furthermore, the findings contribute to practitioners by providing valuable insights into navigating ecosystem transformations. In particular, how cultivating strong relationships where individuals connect to a place, community, and lifestyle can increase collective transformative power to drive meaningful change.

Keywords: Business Ecosystem, Ecosystem Transformation, Network Embeddedness, Business Model Innovation, Ski Resorts, Ski Industry, Climate Change

Word count: 19 790

Acknowledgments

We would like to begin by extending our sincerest gratitude to our supervisor Suvi Nenonen for her invaluable support and guidance throughout this process. Your constructive feedback and thoughtful advice made this process truly rewarding.

Secondly, we would like to thank all the interviewees from the three cases for taking time out of their day during their peak season to share their experiences with us. Without your input, this study would not have been possible. It was a true pleasure to learn from you.

Finally, we would like to thank our friends, family and academic peers for supporting and encouraging us throughout this process. Your support did not go unnoticed.

Isabelle & Vendela

List of Definitions

Term	Definition
Business Ecosystems	Groups of interacting firms, working cooperatively and depending on each other's activities to create value through a focal VP. Synthesised from Daymond et al. (2023), Cobben et al. (2022), Adner (2017), Clarysse et al. (2014), Teece (2007), Iansiti & Levien (2004), and Moore (1996)
Business Model	A firm's configurations of business model elements geared towards creating, delivering, and capturing value. Adapted from Johnson et al. (2008)
Business Model Innovation	The active process by which a firm brings novelty into core business elements and/or their interlinks. Synthesised from Foss & Saebi (2017), Casadesus-Masanell & Zhu (2013), Bucherer et al. (2012), and Gambardella & McGahan (2010)
Destination Company	A co-owned company aiming to attract visitors to the resort and its surrounding area through consolidating parts of marketing, advertising, sales, reservations, guests services, event planning, and destination development. Adapted from SLAO (2022)
Ecosystem Transformation	How ecosystems change or evolve …as a result of multidirectional influences between ecosystem actors and their ecosystem context. Daymond et al. (2023)
Integrated Ski Resort	Designed from scratch on virgin territory to be a purpose-built ski resort where the ski operator owned the ski operations as well as most of the related activities including accommodation, restaurants, shops and other facilities Adapted from Scott et al. (2020)
Intermediary	The degree to which actors have access to external bodies or forums working in the interest of all participants to facilitate knowledge-sharing.
Local Identification	The degree to which actors in a network identify with the same place, community and lifestyle.
Mature Ecosystems	Mature ecosystems are those which resonate with the following characteristics: (a) stability, (b) longevity, (c) ecosystem-level problem-solving routines, and (d) shared norms and practices. Adapted from Foss et al. (2023) and Adner (2017)
Non-Integrated Ski Resort	Ski companies who operate the ski lifts, allowing local business to run related activities. Clydesdale (2007)
Ski Resort	A destination that provides facilities and services for skiing and

	snowboarding, as well as other winter sports and activities offered by several organisations. Adapted from Cambridge Dictionary (2023) and SLAO (2022)
Ski Operator	An organisation in charge of operating and managing ski facilities at a ski resort. This may include performing tasks such as maintaining the ski slopes, operating ski lifts, providing equipment rentals, organising ski schools, offering food and beverage services, and managing accommodations and other facilities at the resort. Adapted from Rice et al. (2022) and SLAO (2022)

Abbreviations

BM – Business Model

BMI – Business Model Innovation

SLAO – Svenska Skidanläggningars Organisation or Swedish Ski Areas Organization

VP – Value Proposition

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The ski industry represents an economic engine in many regional areas across the globe. During the 1960s and 1970s international mass tourism emerged and many ski resorts were built and expanded, creating the foundation for the contemporary ski industry (Hudson, 2015). To date, the ski industry has become a multi-billion dollar international market attracting over 300 million ski visits annually, where Sweden ranks amongst the top five largest markets in Europe (Vanat, 2021; Steiger et al., 2019). Whilst acknowledging that skiing can be perceived as a luxury market for consumers, it is undoubtedly a vital market for local communities and regional development. The ski industry serves as a significant driver of economic activity in rural areas, generating employment opportunities, and contributing to overall growth (Vanat, 2022).

However, climate change, with rising temperatures and increasing weather variability, is putting the industry at considerable risk. Amongst the various sectors, scholars have paid significant attention to the ski industry as being one the most impacted markets, due to the strong reliance on specific climatic conditions for being able to operate (Steiger et al., 2019). So far, climate change has demonstrated the most severe impact on the European Alps with studies predicting that the region will lose up to 25 percent of its snow mass over the next 10 to 30 years (IPCC, 2022). However, recent studies also reveal that a significant reduction in season length for Swedish ski resorts located below the arctic circle[1] can be expected already in the 2030s (e.g., Rice et al., 2022; Demiroglu et al., 2020). This also raises many concerns about the viability for the Swedish ski industry.

Because of these pressuring circumstances, numerous Swedish ski resorts now find themselves at a crucial point, faced with the pivotal decision of whether and how to transform their offerings (Rice et al., 2022). Given the long-standing reliance on traditional approaches for creating and delivering value to customers, the need for ski operators to innovate their business models (BM), in light of these exceptional circumstances, is arguably more important than ever. Scholars have documented a range of measures undertaken by ski operators, including investing in artificial snow-making, developing slopes to reduce the snow-depth required to operate, as well as diversifying operations beyond traditional ski activities including accommodation, shops, and summer-activities (Rice et al., 2022; Scott & McBoyle, 2007). However, to successfully innovate, scholars underline that ski operators are dependent on a multitude of local actors such as owners of shops, accommodations, and other surrounding activities (Scott & McBoyle, 2007). This collaborative nature adds an interesting layer to the pressuring conditions, as ski operators need to navigate a complex set of relationships, as well as take into account what kind of resources and opportunities their varying contexts offer when they explore how to innovate and transform. This, coupled with the historical establishment of ski resorts decades ago and the pressing challenges of climate change, gives rise to interesting considerations about how ski resorts will transform to navigate these unprecedented circumstances.

[1] See map in Appendix 8.1

1.2 Previous Research and Research Gaps

In parallel, there has been a growing recognition in academic literature of the increasing turbulence and complexity of business environments. Thus scholars are increasingly shifting focus from the traditional views of industries to instead viewing firms as part of ecosystems (e.g., Tsujimoto et al., 2018; Adner, 2017; Moore, 1996). In essence, this shift highlights firms' relationships and dependence on each other to jointly create value. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of constantly transforming to remain competitive and navigate pressures (Kretschmer et al., 2022; Tsujimoto, Kajikawa et al. 2018; Scaringella & Radziwon, 2018). This view resonates with the dynamics within ski resorts today. Interestingly, the literature on ecosystems in management research further reveals two promising research gaps.

To begin with, scholars have predominantly examined early (e.g., Thompson et al., 2018; Goswami et al., 2018; Autio et al., 2018) to mid-stages of an ecosystem's lifecycle (e.g., Adner & Kapoor, 2016, 2010; McDermott et al., 2013). Thus, to a large extent overlooking dynamics in mature ecosystems, including their potential decline. To our knowledge, only a few articles have discussed these aspects, focusing on short-term pressures (e.g., Floetgen et al., 2021; Ratten, 2020). As such, revealing a significant gap, also stressed by several prominent scholars (Daymond et al. 2023; Foss et al. 2023; Floetgen et al., 2021). Furthermore, extensive research has been devoted to examine different facilitators of transforming ecosystems, wherein a significant portion focuses on a firm's internal capabilities to manage change (e.g., Altman et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012; Boudreau & Hagiu 2008). However, there is limited research investigating how a firm's context can influence ecosystem transformation (e.g., Mathias et al., 2021; Nambisan & Sawhney, 2011; Smith & Stevens, 2010). Consequently, revealing a second gap, where scholars call for further research into exploring how the context influences ecosystem transformation (e.g., Foss et al., 2023; Giudici et al., 2018; Nambisan & Sawhney 2011; Smith & Stevens, 2010).

Therefore, two intriguing research gaps emerge. Firstly, understanding the transformation process in mature ecosystems that face the risk of decline, and secondly, how contextual factors influence ecosystem transformation. Recognising the maturity and collaborative nature of ski resorts, we argue that these gaps can be effectively addressed through an analysis of ski resorts in Sweden. Considering the important role of ski operators in driving change, we analyse the transformation process from their perspective, in which the ski operator represents the focal firm. As a result, the following purpose and research question are formulated.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

Against the background, the purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of how mature ecosystem transformation is influenced by its context wherein a focal firm sets the innovation agenda and coordinates the ecosystem activities. By doing so, we aim to bring new insights into ecosystem research as well as support practitioners in navigating ecosystem transformation. To receive a nuanced view, we conducted a qualitative comparative case study, in which ski resorts represent mature ecosystems. Hence our research question is stated as follows:

How are contextual factors influencing ski resorts when transforming their ecosystems?

1.4 Expected Contribution

By addressing the research gaps, this study is expected to make several contributions. Firstly, we aim to enhance understanding of dynamics in mature ecosystems during transformation. Thus, extending previous literature by providing deeper insights into the later stages of ecosystem lifecycles. Secondly, by analysing the influence of context on ecosystem transformation, our aim is to generate new knowledge regarding the relationship between different contexts and the focal firms' actions in the change process.

For scholars, these insights hold considerable potential to offer a more nuanced comprehension of the processual view of ecosystem dynamics as well as provide insights into the broader understanding of ecosystem lifecycles. For practitioners, we aim to provide guidance, subject to further validation, in how to effectively navigate ecosystem transformations, taking into account the influence of contextual factors. This is not only of interest to ski resorts, but also municipalities, non-profit organisations, and associations involved in the transformation.

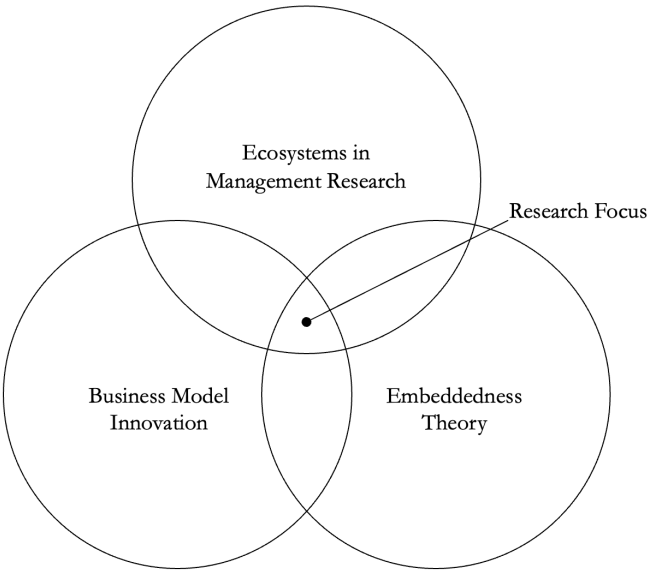
1.5 Delimitations

To set a manageable scope, several delimitations were made. Firstly, we delimited our study to examine privately-owned ski resorts facing similar climatic conditions. To find similar threat-levels from climate change, we delimited the geographical scope to include ski resorts situated in regions projected to receive a maximum of 100 days of natural snow per year between 2021 and 2050 (Demiroglu et al., 2020). This approach led to the exclusion of large portions of northern Sweden (see Appendix 8.1). The reason for this was to harmonise the data sample, which aimed to include ski resorts exposed to pressures and with an apparent need for transformation, as well as increase comparability between cases. Noteworthy is that this may reduce the applicability to other cases. Secondly, we acknowledge that multiple aspects influence firm actions. However, to create a distinct research scope, we delimit the study to examine a firm's context by exploring its network embeddedness. We argue that this captures a comprehensive understanding of the context, further elaborated and substantiated in the following section.

2. Literature Review

The following section will review the literature on (2.1) business ecosystems. Whilst this is our primary stream, we complement it in two ways to address the formulated research question. Firstly, we examine (2.2) business model innovation (BMI) literature to enable a deeper understanding of the focal firm. Secondly, we integrate insights from (2.3) embeddedness theory to enhance understanding of how a focal firm's context, represented in its network embeddedness, may influence actions. Lastly, we conclude by (2.4) synthesising the literature and presenting our (2.5) theoretical framework, building on insights from all three streams.

Figure 1. *Outline of the Research Area*



2.1 Ecosystems in Management Research

Research on ecosystems within the field of management has historically examined various (2.1.1) conceptualisations of and roles within ecosystems, (2.1.2) the process of ecosystem change, as well as various (2.1.3) facilitators of change. These will be examined in the following sections.

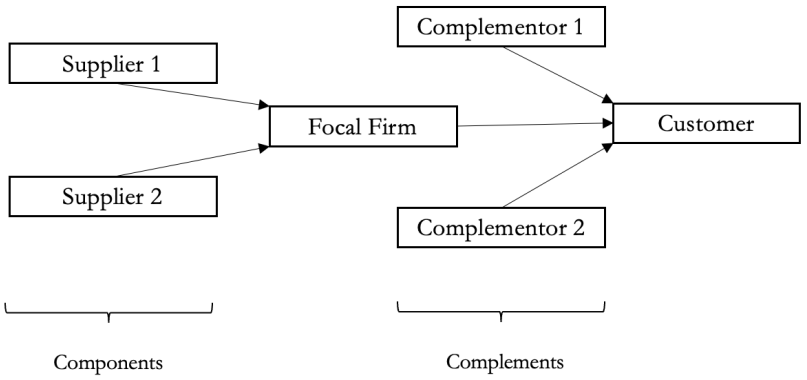
2.1.1 Conceptualisations of Ecosystems

Originating from the natural sciences, ecosystems have been widely studied by scholars from various fields. The concept of ecosystems in management research was first introduced by Moore and in his 1996 book *"The Death of Competition"* he stated that the term industry should be replaced by business ecosystem as he believed industry was too narrow. As opposed to traditional views, Moore (1996) argued that companies no longer compete solely within their own industry, but instead compete within a larger ecosystem of related actors. Recent studies commonly refer to the presence of a focal firm[2] (e.g., Lingens et al., 2022; Jacobides et al., 2018; Adner 2017), together with other business actors often classified into suppliers, complementors and customers,

[2] Also referred to as ecosystem orchestrator, hub, ecosystem architect, keystone player amongst others

as illustrated in figure 2 (Adner & Kapoor, 2010). From an ecosystem perspective, a company's success is not determined by its position within an industry but rather by its ability to navigate a complex set of relationships. These relationships make up the broader ecosystem that create and capture value (Tsujimoto et al., 2018; Barnett, 2006).

Figure 2. *Generic Schema of an Ecosystem (Adner & Kapoor, 2010)*



Since the inception of ecosystem research, four main ecosystem types have dominated the discourse; *business-* (Moore, 1996), *innovation-* (Adner & Kapoor, 2010), *platform-* (Kretschmer et al., 2022), and *entrepreneurial* ecosystems (Thompson et al., 2018). Entrepreneurial ecosystems are distinct in that they to a larger extent involve actors from various sectors, often with the aim to support the creation and growth of new ventures (Thompson et al., 2018). Contrastingly, the other three tend to be more centred around a common value proposition (VP). Moore's business ecosystems focused on value capture, whilst Adner's innovation ecosystems emphasised joint value creation, somewhat blurring the two definitions over time. Recent studies have also found platform ecosystems to fit into these conceptualisations. For instance, Jacobides et al. (2018) view all of these three as *"group(s) of interacting firms that depend on each other's activities"*, but with different focal objects bringing them together, indicated by their prefixes. Thus, innovation ecosystems centre around a new technology and its related new VPs, whereas platform actors are connected by design rules. Lastly, actors in a business ecosystem are more conceptually connected, as opposed to materially, with core attributes being a focal firm, the coevolvement of mutually beneficial ("symbiotic") relationships between actors, and the alignment of a shared vision and value creation.

Although theoretically distinct, ecosystem boundaries are often blurred in the empirical reality. To enhance analytical effectiveness, we stress the importance of establishing a rationale for determining the most suitable ecosystem type and provide further clarifications to the definition. We view a ski resort as a complex network of interdependent actors centred around a ski operator to provide access to a skiing experience, which is the VP (Rice et al., 2022). Hence, resonating with the core attributes of business ecosystems. By synthesising commonly used definitions (see Appendix 8.2), we view business ecosystems as *groups of interacting firms, working cooperatively and depending on each other's activities to create value through a focal VP.* In ski resorts, important actors include amongst others the ski operator (focal firm), local entrepreneurs offering surrounding activities (complementors), providers of lift infrastructure (suppliers), and skiers (customers) (Rice et al., 2022; Adner & Kapoor, 2010).

2.1.2 Ecosystem Change

2.1.2.1 Emergence and Transformation of Ecosystems

The processual view on ecosystems constitutes a rapidly growing literature stream focusing on the change process in ecosystems. Moore (1993) introduced the processual view through the identification of four evolutionary stages – birth, expansion, leadership, and self-renewal. Scholars have since distinguished between the *emergence* of new ecosystems and the *transformation*[3] of existing ecosystems (Jacobides et al., 2018). Daymond et al. (2023) offer a clear distinction between the two, defining emergence as *"a process that involves (a) the creation of novelty, (b) its growth to a salient size, and (c) its formation into a recognizable social object, process, or structure",* and transformation as *"how ecosystems change or evolve …as a result of multidirectional influences between ecosystem actors and their ecosystem context"*. As such, research on emergence examines the birth of new ecosystems, where scholars have explored how ecosystems communicate and coordinate (Goswami et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2018), disseminate knowledge and shared understanding (Fang et al., 2021; Mathias et al., 2021; Autio et al., 2018), and strategies for value creation and capture amongst actors (Khanagha et al., 2022; Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018). On the other hand, transformation refers to the change in existing ecosystems. In this stream, scholars have examined strategies for transforming (Adner & Kapoor, 2016, 2010), the role of resource-flows (McDermott et al., 2013), complementors (Wang & Miller, 2020), as well as conflicts (Jones et al., 2021) amongst others.

Thus, existing literature predominantly concentrates on the early-to-midstages of ecosystem lifecycles, leaving a significant gap to mature stages, including dynamics during potential decline. The COVID-19 outbreak gave rise to a few articles examining rapid decline. For instance, Floetgen et al. (2021) followed a case survey approach studying digital platform ecosystems and identified short-term coping strategies for managing crises, highlighting the need to develop a *"new normal"* rather than going back to pre-crisis practices. Furthermore, Ratten (2020) reviewed literature on how COVID-19 affected entrepreneurial ecosystems and suggested that crises can spur innovation and improve entrepreneurs ability to respond to diverse external pressures. Thus, raising interesting points regarding implications of shorter-term pressures. However, a significant research gap remains, particularly within business ecosystems. As such, several prominent scholars call for further research into analysing dynamics within more mature ecosystems (Daymond et al., 2023; Foss et al., 2023; Floetgen et al., 2021).

Defining maturity in ecosystems is challenging due to its lack of universal standards and limited research on the topic. However, scholars have highlighted (a) stability, (b) longevity, (c) ecosystem-level problem-solving routines and (d) shared norms and practices as common characteristics (Foss et al., 2023; Adner, 2017). Thus, highlighting that coordination and cooperation occurs in an autonomous manner from which we build our view. We therefore consider mature ecosystems to be those that resonate with the aforementioned characteristics. Ski resorts represent a promising unit of analysis due to the (a,b) longevity of many Swedish ski

[3] Also referred to as evolution

resorts, and (c,d) established practices of operating. Lastly, since ski resorts represent established ecosystems, we are exploring transformation, as opposed to emergence, further examined below.

2.1.2.2 Phases of Ecosystem Transformation

Scholars emphasise the need for ecosystems to continuously adapt to remain competitive (Scaringella & Radziwon, 2018). To our knowledge, a handful of scholars have presented various classifications of the transformation process in business ecosystems, with a rather synonymous nature. For instance, Möller et al. (2020) put forward three phases: exploration, mobilisation, and stabilisation. Similarly, Kolagar et al. (2022) identify formation, orchestration, and expansion. Lastly, Oghazi et al. (2022) expand the process into four phases: transformational forces, opportunity identification, value alignment, and revitalisation. By reviewing and identifying the most significant activities involved (see Appendix 8.3), we propose the following three-phased process and related key activities, outlined in table 1.

Table 1. *Overview of the Ecosystem Transformation Process*

Exploration	Orchestration	Stabilisation
· Creating a vision for the ecosystem · Discover the right customer VP · Mapping appropriate partnerships · Network learning	· Forming of joint goals · Alignment of ecosystem actors towards shared vision · Organising and coordinating ecosystem actors	· Continuous incremental improvements · Strengthening ties between ecosystem actors · Creation of norms and standards

In reality, the transformation process is a highly complex phenomenon where the conceptual phases often become intertwined. However, making this simplification aids theoretical understanding and helps explain the fundamentals of a ski resort's change process.

Furthermore, consistent with literature (e.g., Lingens et al., 2022; Valkokari, 2015), we adopt a focal firm perspective, wherein we consider the focal firm to drive the agenda for the wider business ecosystem. As such, activities relating to the exploration phase are primarily focused on a focal firm-level, whereas the orchestration and stabilisation phases take place on an ecosystem-level. Due to a lack of conceptual tools examining value creation on a firm-level within ecosystem research, we argue a need for integrating insights from BMI literature. Thus, to contribute to the purpose of this study, we further examine the connection between ecosystems and BMs in section 2.2.

2.1.3 Facilitators of Ecosystem Change

Having examined conceptualisations and ecosystem change, we finally delve into the third stream. In this stream, scholars have highlighted various facilitators for ecosystem change such as technological capabilities (Autio et al., 2018; Jabodies et al., 2018), competitive pressures (Khanagha et al., 2022), and internal capabilities (Altman et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012; Boudreau & Hagiu 2008). The latter constitute the largest stream and most scholars draw on the underlying pillars of dynamic capabilities theory (Teece, 2007), to examine how focal firms can

pursue ecosystem leadership and address coordination issues. Of particular interest, Foss et al. (2023) highlight the significance of leaders' problem-solving skills in mature ecosystems. As the initial rules and standards set by the leader may not cover all connections in later phases, issues can arise. Therefore, the ability to manage ad-hoc problems is argued to be crucial for maintaining stability. Whilst most of the literature on business ecosystems has concentrated on a firm's internal capabilities for managing change, researchers examining other ecosystems have raised interesting perspectives relevant to this study of ski resorts.

To begin with, the role of close proximity has been discussed in entrepreneurial ecosystems. For instance, Mathias et al. (2021) conduct a meta-analysis of 42 studies exploring its relation to knowledge-spillover effects. The authors find that whilst close proximity promotes innovation, it does not consistently lead to better financial performance. Furthermore, Smith & Stevens (2010) argue that the smaller the geographical area in which social entrepreneurship is practised, the more likely the development of strong social connections. This is due to reduced physical distance, which allows for more frequent interaction. Several scholars call for more research studying how the context influences changes in ecosystems (Daymond et al,. 2023; Giudici et al., 2018; Smith & Stevens, 2010). Foss et al. (2023) and Nambisan & Sawhney (2011) specifically highlight extending with relevant network constructs. Therefore, we build on embeddedness theory to represent the context and further examine linkages to ecosystem transformation in section 2.3.

2.2 Business Model Innovation

Since this study takes a focal firm perspective, we argue a need for understanding firm-level value creation, since it enables a more nuanced understanding of ecosystem transformations. Whilst this literature encompasses diverse domains, we will focus on three to maintain coherence with our purpose: (2.2.1) the BM and ecosystem relationship, (2.2.2) the elements of a BM, and (2.2.3) BMI.

2.2.1 Business Models and Business Ecosystems

In recent years, scholars have taken a broader view to the concept of BMs, exploring their connection to the greater business ecosystem (Yi et al., 2022; Snihur et al., 2018; Adner, 2017). As noted, the BM literature primarily focuses on firm-level value creation, whereas the ecosystem literature centres around partner-level value creation (Adner, 2017). Despite this distinction, the two streams complement each other effectively, revealing clear connections in their nestedness and central role of the firm.

Firstly, BMs are not only representations of firms, they also offer comprehensive outlooks on how businesses operate and create value beyond firm boundaries (Rong et al., 2018). Several scholars emphasise the reciprocal relationship between BMs and ecosystems, where BMs impact ecosystem dynamics and, in turn, are influenced by the ecosystem itself (Hellström et al., 2015). Secondly, both streams emphasise the prominent role of a focal firm: in BM literature as the main unit of analysis, and in ecosystem literature as a focal actor (see figure 2 above) (e.g. Yi et al.,

2022; Snihur et al., 2018; Adner, 2017). The focal firm's BM, and any changes thereof, can hence affect the ecosystem at large (Snihur & Bocken, 2022) – both negatively and positively. Whilst existing BMs can be sources of inertia in an ecosystem by being a cognitive barrier to change (Bidmon & Knab, 2018), BMI can lead to innovation within the greater ecosystem, particularly when there is an alignment of BMs amongst actors (Hellström et al., 2015).

Building on these notions, firms (and their BMs) do not operate in isolation but are part of a broader network of interconnected and interdependent actors. Therefore, we view BMs as the infrastructure of business ecosystems. To enhance our understanding of the firm-level phase in ecosystem transformation, the following section examines the elements of a BM.

2.2.2 Business Models: An Element Perspective

Since its introduction (Bellman et al., 1957), the term BM has been widely adopted amongst scholars, taking on different lenses to identify BM fundamentals, there amongst activity systems, strategy, and capabilities (Zott et al., 2011; Foss & Saebi, 2017; Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010). Through these lenses, scholars have identified core elements of a BM, frequently mentioning a firm's VP, the stakeholders which are involved in the creation of value, and the profit model, amongst others (e.g. Johnson et al., 2008; Osterwalder et al., 2005). Based on these notions, we define a BM as *a firm's configurations of business model elements geared towards creating, delivering, and capturing value.* Thus, we apply a perspective where the BM is represented in six elements that were chosen based on synthesising the extant literature, presented in table 2.

Table 2. *Elements of a Business Model*

Element	Definition	Highlighted by
Value Proposition	The objects of value offered to a customer. *(E.g., the product, service, information or a mix of these)*	Lambert, 2008; Johnson et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2005
Target Customer	For whom the firm creates value. *(E.g., the customer segment, customer demographics, geographical location)*	Wirtz et al., 2016; Lambert, 2008; Morris et al., 2005; Osterwalder et al., 2005
Resources/ Capabilities	The internal core competencies and resources which the firm utilises in order to create value for the customer. *(E.g., the firms' capabilities, resources, competencies and strategic assets)*	Wirtz et al., 2016; Frankenberger et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2008; Hamel, 2001
Channels	The various means by which the firm gets in touch with its customers. *(E.g., marketing, sales, distribution channels)*	Teece, 2010; Lambert, 2008; Morris et al., 2005; Osterwalder et al., 2005;
Profit Model	The blueprint which defines how the company creates value for itself, providing a consistent logic for earning profits. *(E.g., the pricing and revenue sources, cost structure, and margins of the business)*	Chesbrough, 2010; Johnson et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2005; Osterwalder et al., 2005
Stakeholders	The various external relationships which enable the firm to create value. *(E.g., suppliers, shareholders, allies, partnerships with external parties)*	Wirtz et al., 2016; Lambert, 2008; Morris et al., 2005; Hamel, 2001

Considering the purpose of this thesis, we further employ the transformational approach to BMs. This approach has gained significant attention from scholars in recent years, who view the BM as a means of addressing change and engaging in innovation (Zott et al., 2011; Demil & Lecocq, 2010; Johnson et al., 2008). This means that we consider the elements as the content, where changes thereof may translate into BMI, which can lead to ecosystem-level orchestration and stabilisation. The following section will examine the essence of BMI.

2.2.3 Business Model Innovation

Over the last 15 years, BMI has gained increased attention amongst scholars. Most prominently, BMI has been viewed as a way to obtain a competitive advantage, either by being a first-mover changing the rules of the game or by entering a market later with a superior BM (e.g., Afuah, 2014; Voelpel et al., 2004).

We draw upon the following research to conceptualise BMI. Foss & Saebi (2017) define BMI as an *"active process whereby management innovates the BM"* placing an emphasis on it being an active, intentional process. Furthermore, several scholars underline the aspect of novelty, by presenting BMI as finding novel ways of commercialising its underlying assets, new ways to generate revenues and define VPs for stakeholders (Casadesus-Masanell & Zhu, 2013; Gambardella & McGahan, 2010). Lastly, Bucherer et al. (2012) describe it as a process whereby firms *"change the core elements of a firm and its business logic"*, implying the need for a substantial change, as opposed to minor adaptation, in either the elements or their interlinks. Thus, we define BMI as *the active process by which a firm brings novelty into core business elements and/or their interlinks.*

BMI can further be classified into either radical or incremental based on the degree of novelty. Radical innovation is characterised by a higher degree of novelty, being broad in scope and breaking with the model that previously existed (Foss & Saebi, 2017; Souto, 2015). This oftentimes translates into more complex changes in the architecture of a BM and the interlinks between elements (Amit & Zott, 2012). Contrastingly, incremental innovation is characterised by lower degrees of novelty, focusing on improving the existing BM and innovating in one or more individual BM elements rather than their interlinks (Santos et al., 2009).

Having examined the essence of BM literature in relation to our research question, we incorporate key findings into the transformation process. Whilst recognising that all firms in an ecosystem are made up of BMs, we narrow our theoretical lens to primarily focus on the focal firm, to establish a manageable scope. As such, we extend the firm-level phase of exploration to also include innovation to BM elements and/or its interlinks, as illustrated in table 3.

Table 3. *Overview of Ecosystem Transformation Process (Extended)*

Firm-level	**Ecosystem-level**	
Exploration	**Orchestration**	**Stabilisation**
· Creating a vision for the ecosystem · Discover the right customer VP · Mapping appropriate partnerships · Network learning	· Forming of joint goals · Alignment of ecosystem actors towards shared vision · Organising and coordinating ecosystem actors	· Continuous incremental improvements · Strengthening ties between ecosystem actors · Creation of norms and standards
Business Model Innovation		
· Innovation in business model elements and/or its interlinks		

2.3 Embeddedness Theory

Revisiting the purpose of this study which is to examine how contextual factors influence mature ecosystem transformation [...], the following sections complement ecosystem research with literature on embeddedness theory, which is used to represent contextual factors. Whilst embeddedness theory contains a wealth of research, we will discuss two primary areas: (2.3.1) the relationship between networks and ecosystems, and (2.3.2) network embeddedness and its implications.

2.3.1 Networks and Business Ecosystems

The concept of embeddedness originates from sociology, highlighting that economic activities are not purely transactional, but rather embedded within social and institutional contexts that can influence and constrain actions (Granovetter, 1985, 2005; Uzzi & Gillespie, 2002). Consequently, firms must also consider the social network in which they are embedded, as interconnected actors can significantly shape firm actions in various ways. Scholars have identified various types of embeddedness including *network*-, *cultural*-, *political*-, and *religious* embeddedness (Granovetter, 2005). Amongst these different types, network embeddedness represents a dominant stream. Scholars have for instance examined embedded networks relation to competitive dynamics (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001; McEvily & Zaheer, 1999), social entrepreneurship (Mair & Martí, 2006), and knowledge transfer (Kiessling et al., 2023; Tihanyi et al., 2004) amongst others.

Several scholars have noted the connection between ecosystems and networks, commonly suggesting that ecosystems consist of networks. For instance, Clarysse et al. (2014) suggest that business ecosystems are value networks where the VP is offered by a group of mutually complementary firms. Similarly, Tsujimoto et al. (2018) highlight that scholars view business

ecosystems as business player networks. Lastly, Iansiti and Levien (2004) further argue that a business ecosystem is a business network in which entities interact in complex ways. Essentially, networks and business ecosystems share characteristics in going beyond viewing the firm as an isolated entity to being dependent on, or interacting with other actors. Whilst networks focus on actor relationships, business ecosystems centre around a focal VP. This implies that they do not have to be the same, but they have the potential to be. For the purpose of our study, we regard them as conceptually similar[4].

We thus delimit the theoretical lens to examine a firm's context by its network embeddedness. This, as network embeddedness captures a multitude of significant aspects of a firm's context and provides a holistic understanding of potential influences on the focal firm's actions. This is further examined next.

2.3.2 Network Embeddedness

The concept of network embeddedness is made up of two primary factors: structural and relational embeddedness (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001), which can influence firm actions in a variety of ways. Although not an exhaustive list, the following sections aim to examine the core rationales put forward by prominent scholars.

2.3.2.1 Structural Embeddedness

Structural embeddedness combines organisation- and social network theory, suggesting that a firm's position within a network structure defines its access to economic opportunities (Uzzi, 1996). Network structure can be broken down into four factors (see table 4) (Gnyawali & Madhavan 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Table 4. *Overview of the Four Factors of Structural Embeddedness*

Factor	Definition	Highlighted by
Centrality	The extent to which a firm is involved in multiple significant ties in a network.	Granovetter (1985)
Structural holes	The gaps or holes between actors in a network who have different but complementary information.	Burt (1995)
Structural equivalence	The similarity of actors in a network in terms of their connections to other firms.	Gnyawali & Madhavan (2001)
Network density	The degree to which actors in a network are interconnected.	Rowley et al. (2000)

Scholars argue that a firm's position with respect to these factors can influence firm actions. Firstly, Granovetter (1985) argues that firms that are more central in a network gain greater access to valuable resources, information, and opportunities. This may provide firms with better strategic opportunities, leading to an advantageous position in the network. Secondly, the

[4] Whilst we perceive networks and business ecosystems as conceptually similar, we intentionally employ both terms throughout the thesis to align with the usage by scholars in the ecosystem literature, who also use the terms interchangeably

existence of structural holes indicates that firms occupying these positions may possess distinct advantages in terms of accessing a wide range of information and opportunities that are not accessible to others. This can enable them to innovate in different ways than others (Burt, 1995). Thirdly, Gnyawali & Madhavan (2001) suggest that structurally equivalent firms tend to avoid taking actions against each other because of their mutual dependence on the network and resources, making them more likely to take similar actions. Finally, networks with higher network density may facilitate greater cooperation and collaboration amongst firms. This can enable firms to engage in joint value creation, share resources, and benefit from economies of scale (Rowley et al., 2000). The structural factor of network embeddedness thus focuses on a firm's position in the network, whilst the second factor emphasises the quality of the relationships between actors, further elaborated on in the following section.

2.3.2.2 Relational Embeddedness

The second factor, relational embeddedness, examines the quality of connections between actors within a network (Granovetter, 2005), and is defined as the *"personal relationships people have developed with each other through a history of interactions"* (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Fundamental aspects of relational embeddedness are trust amongst individuals, feelings of closeness, intimacy and reciprocity, and the level of resource-commitment to each other (Moran, 2005). Consistent with the definition, scholars have found that the tie-strength between actors depends on the amount of time and frequency of interactions (e.g., Wulf & Butel, 2017; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

The existence of strong ties can influence firm actions in a variety of ways. Firms with high-quality ties may be more likely to share both explicit and tacit (more complex) information, leading firms to make more informed decisions and better identify opportunities in the market (Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Rowley et al., 2000). However, scholars also argue that weak ties can be beneficial due to their ability to deliver novel information and knowledge, because closely connected actors tend to share knowledge one already knows. Hence, scholars argue that low-quality ties hold greater potential to encourage business development and trigger more radical innovations (Granovetter, 2005; Uzzi, 1996). Furthermore, high-quality ties in networks tend to foster collaborative relationships characterised by trust, knowledge-sharing, and shared goals and interests (Wulf & Butel, 2017). Lastly, scholars also argue that strong ties between actors result in stronger social control mechanisms as firms may be sanctioned within the network if they do not follow norms (Wulf & Butel, 2017; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Whilst the relational and structural factors of network embeddedness can be viewed separately, it is important to note their interrelationship as well. For instance, that over-embeddedness can have potential negative effects. Over-embeddedness is characterised by an over-reliance on a few actors or unnecessary connections in the network. This may reduce the flow of information between actors, leading to a lack of awareness and limited creativity in identifying network opportunities – also known as network-blindness (Andersen, 2013; Uzzi, 1997). Thus scholars note that whilst network embeddedness can have positive effects on business development, over-embeddedness may diminish these potential benefits (Andersen, 2013).

After reviewing the three literature streams to support our purpose, the following section will summarise the literature and present the theoretical framework used to analyse our empirical findings.

2.4 Synthesis and Research Gaps

Drawing upon our comprehensive and critical review, with a particular focus on ecosystem literature as our primary research stream, we present a concise synthesis, followed by an outline of the identified research gaps.

The state of ecosystem literature can be considered intermediate, having generated a substantial amount of theoretical and empirical work, whilst still revealing significant research gaps. Essentially, ecosystem literature shifts the focus from traditional models of competitive dynamics to a more holistic perspective that considers the interconnectedness of firms within broader ecosystems and joint value creation (Moore, 1996). Dominant research streams within ecosystem literature include conceptualisations, change processes, and facilitators of managing change, all of which primarily focus on partner-level value creation. However, as the role of a focal firm in driving ecosystem change has become more highlighted, the connection between business ecosystems and BM literature has been increasingly explored. For enabling a deeper understanding of both firm- and partner-level activities, the review integrates key insights from BMI literature. Fundamentally, firms (and their BMs) interact, hence, BMs can be understood as the infrastructure of a business ecosystem. Furthermore, the review draws upon embeddedness theory to shed light on a firm's context, and examine potential influences on its actions. Many scholars view business ecosystems as made up of networks, which implies that the concepts are not necessarily the same, but hold the potential to be. Viewing them as similar enables an application of the structural and relational factors of a network, whereby theory can guide how they can influence the transformation process based on different positions (Granovetter, 1985).

Altogether, our review sheds light on two primary research gaps, which this thesis aims to address. Firstly, scholars examining the processual view on ecosystems have predominantly emphasised early (e.g., Thompson et al., 2018; Goswami et al., 2018; Autio et al., 2018) to mid-stages of an ecosystem's lifecycle (e.g., Adner & Kapoor, 2016, 2010; McDermott et al., 2013). For instance by exploring coordination, knowledge sharing, and strategies for transformation. Only a few articles examine transformation processes aligning with our view on mature ecosystems. Consequently, as our review demonstrates, there is a significant lack of research analysing mature ecosystems, including potential decline, also urged by Daymond et al. (2023), Foss et al. (2023), and Floetgen et al. (2021). This research gap shows promising opportunities, as it would provide deeper insights into the dynamics of the full lifecycles of ecosystems.

Secondly, whilst the ecosystem literature has mainly focused on facilitators related to a firm's internal capabilities to manage change (e.g., Altman et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012; Boudreau & Hagiu 2008), there has been limited research on how a firm's context can influence ecosystem transformation. With only a few articles shedding light on interesting aspects related to proximity of actors in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Mathias et al., 2021; Smith & Stevens, 2010), there is a

significant gap in the business ecosystem realm. As noted, several scholars call for further research studying how the context influences changes in ecosystems (Daymond et al,. 2023; Giudici et al., 2018; Smith & Stevens, 2010). Foss et al. (2023) and Nambisan & Sawhney (2011) specifically highlight extending with relevant network constructs. This, as it holds considerable potential to create a more holistic understanding of the processual lens on ecosystems.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how mature ecosystem transformation is influenced by its context and address the identified research gaps, a theoretical framework has been developed, drawing on insights from the review.

In line with ecosystem literature and embeddedness theory, the framework acknowledges that firms operate within dynamic social networks and relationships, rather than in isolation. Therefore, firms are not solely influenced by economic factors but also by non-economic relationships (Granovetter, 1985). To remain competitive, firms must foster collaboration and leverage the interconnectedness with other actors to create shared value (Moore, 1996). By viewing business ecosystems and networks as conceptually similar, we analyse a firm's context through its network embeddedness. We also acknowledge the importance of the focal firm in leading the innovation agenda and coordinating the broader ecosystem, positioning it as a central driver of ecosystem transformation.

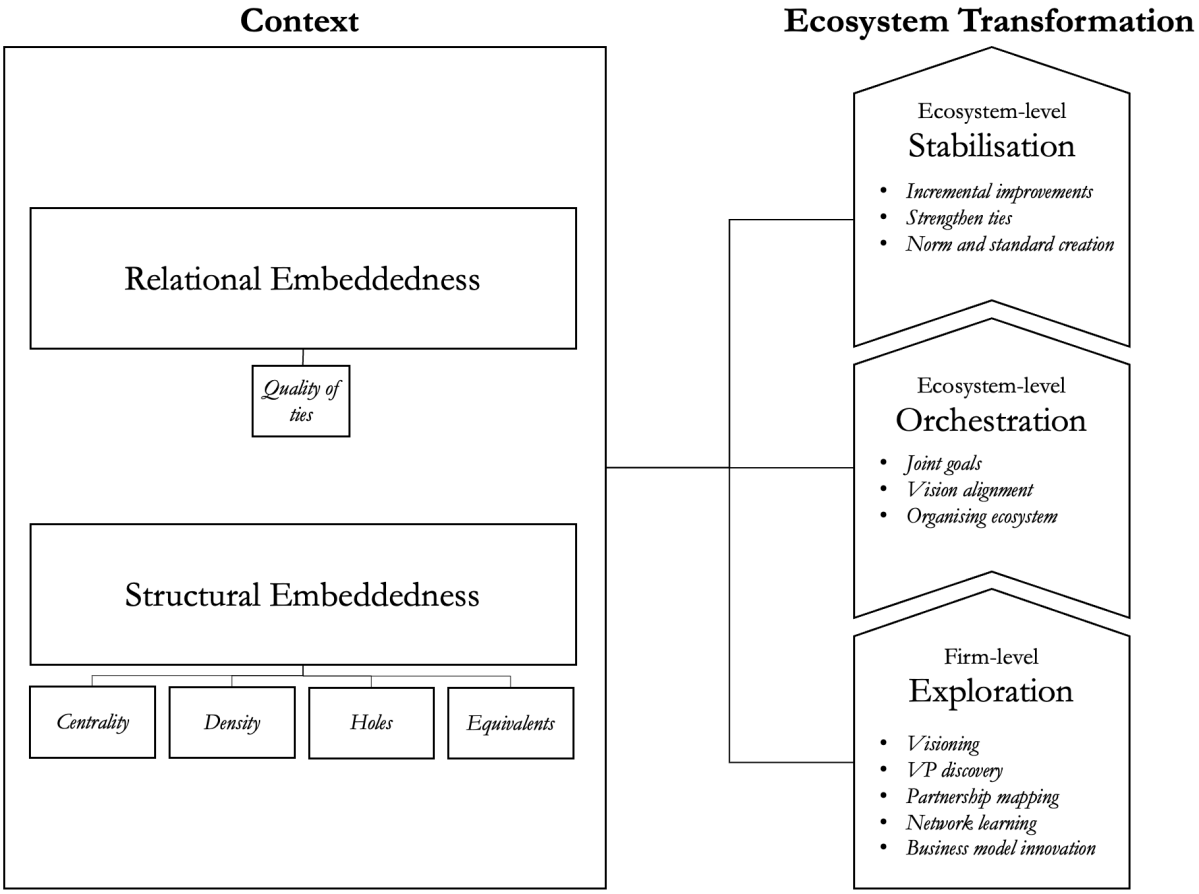
Based on these assumptions, the framework is divided into two parts: the context and the transformation. The first part establishes a frame for analysing a firm's position within its structural and relational context. Firstly, there are four structural factors: centrality, holes, equivalence, and density (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001). Secondly, relational embeddedness refers to the quality of the ties between actors, which can be analysed by the trust, closeness, intimacy, reciprocity, and the level of resource-commitment to each other (Moran, 2005; Rowley et al., 2000). Varying degrees of embeddedness with respect to these factors can yield different firm actions. In particular, with respect to information, knowledge, and resources which either can create or constrain economic opportunities (Granovetter, 2005, 1985). Thus, influencing the focal firm's transformation approach.

The second part encompasses the three-phased transformation process: exploration, orchestration, and stabilisation. To enhance our focal firm-perspective, the exploration phase is expanded with key insights from BMI literature, outlining how innovation occurs through changes to BM elements. We view ecosystem transformation as a sequential progression starting from the firm-level, followed by the ecosystem-level, where multiple actors engage, align and act to stabilise transformation. This process serves as a foundation for identifying patterns and understanding how different positions within the ecosystem can influence and shape actions.

To summarise, the developed theoretical framework provides guidance in how a firm's structural and relational position can influence ecosystem transformation, taking a focal firm-level

perspective. Consequently, creating a distinct lens that contributes to the purpose of this study. This will be used to analyse the empirical findings.

Figure 3. *Theoretical Framework*



3. Methodology

This section outlines our methodological choices for this study. Firstly, the (3.1) research design and approach is outlined, followed by our (3.2) data collection process. Thereafter, we detail the (3.3) data analysis method, and lastly, we discuss (3.4) ethical and quality considerations.

3.1 Research Design and Approach

3.1.1 Methodological Fit

After discovering the risks facing the ski industry and concurrently examining relevant literature, we identified two research gaps that shaped our thesis into an exploratory study approach. Thus, we seek to generate new theoretical insights (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Recognising the significant research gaps, a qualitative study method with an open-ended research question was undertaken. This enabled us to create an in-depth understanding of the research interest as well as explore the presence of absence. This was particularly important given the research question, as additional contextual factors, either their presence or absence, could be captured and analysed. By this approach we want to contribute with a suggestive theory, for which a qualitative study is a methodological fit (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

We took an abductive approach to this study. As abduction entails working with theory and empirics simultaneously, it allows for surprising empirical findings which can lead to new theoretical insight (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This aligns with our aim to generate new theoretical insights. To exemplify, once we began collecting empirics it showed that the social relationships between actors significantly impacted firm actions. This caused us to go back to theory and integrate insights from embeddedness theory. Furthermore, our research question involves a degree of complexity as it investigates how multiple factors, which cannot be viewed in isolation, may influence ecosystem transformation. Thus an abductive approach is most suitable as it allowed us to go back and forth with theory and empirics to create a nuanced understanding of the contextual factors at play (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009).

3.1.2 Scientific Research Approach

For the purpose of this study, we adopt the ontological position of constructivism. Constructivism emphasises that knowledge is socially constructed, subjective, and is created in a continuous construction and reconstruction amongst social actors. We acknowledge that the individuals which make up the actors in the ski resort construct their own meanings and interpretations of the world around them. By adopting a constructivist position, we address the formulated research question by exploring how the influence of the context is experienced by different individuals and can thereby develop a nuanced understanding of how the social reality is constructed. A constructionist approach further allows us to answer the research question whilst acknowledging the relationships observed may change over time (Camargo et al., 2013). Furthermore, we adopt the epistemological view of interpretivism, emphasising meaning-making, which resonates well as we explore a how-question in relation to ecosystem transformation (Bell

et al., 2019). By adopting an interpretivist approach we acknowledge that the way in which the interviewees view their reality may differ from the way we as researchers perceive them (Lee, 1991).

3.1.3 Comparative Case Study Design

We undertook a comparative case study design in line with Eisenhardt (2021) argument for theory building. This was considered a fit since it allowed us to compare, contrast, and identify patterns across different cases. Thus, generating broader insights regarding potential contextual factors as well as important aspects of their transformation. This increases the generalisability of our findings beyond the specific context of a single case and provides a more robust basis for theory building (Bell et al., 2019; Ridder, 2017). Moreover, researchers have emphasised the value of case studies in going beyond description and thereby allowing us to explore *how* ski resorts are influenced by contextual factors when transforming ecosystems (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Finally, a comparative case study design is considered better at delivering more compelling evidence, making the overall study more robust and adding confidence to the findings (Miles et al., 1994).

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Pre-Study

To understand the current state of the ski industry, identify key distinctions between ski resorts in various markets and their development stages as well as validate the study's relevance, a pre-study was conducted. This was done by conducting five exploratory interviews with relevant and knowledgeable stakeholders in the ski industry (see Appendix 8.4). A number of valuable insights arose from these interviews, which guided the trajectory of this study. At this point, no geographical delimitation was yet made.

Firstly, we became aware of significant operational differences between ski resorts in the European Alps and Sweden. Whilst ski resorts in the European Alps are typically managed by multiple ski operators on the same mountain, Swedish resorts are typically operated by a single. Secondly, it became evident that research into the Swedish ski industry is currently underrepresented as scholars have primarily shown interest in Austrian and Swiss ski resorts (Steiger et al., 2019). Thirdly, a significant language barrier was identified to managers operating ski resorts in the Alps. For these reasons and with the aim to provide valuable insights to our purpose, we choose to focus on the Swedish ski industry. Additionally, given the underrepresentation of Sweden in current research it was deemed as showing the greatest potential in revealing interesting findings. Lastly, the interviews validated that Swedish ski resorts are facing external pressures from climate change and that many are currently undergoing or planning transformations. Thus, the pre-study confirmed the relevance of our research interest.

3.2.2 Case Selection

During the case selection process, we employed a fixed purposive sampling approach, where the selection criteria were predetermined based on the pre-study. Ski resorts, particularly the ski operators, were the focus of the case selection. With the purpose to harmonise the data sample and increase comparability amongst the units, the following criteria were set in a so-called priori purposive sampling approach (Bell et al., 2019). The selection criteria aimed to select cases with: (1) similar levels of threat from climate change, as this was considered having an influence on the urgency to transform; (2) observed changes to their BMs, as we are interested in studying a transformation; and (3) ensured in-depth access, despite this study taking place during their peak-season. To ensure (1) similar threat-levels, we built on a study by Demiroglu et al. (2020), and delimited to ski resorts situated in regions projected to receive a maximum of 100 days of natural snow per year between 2021 and 2050. This approach led to the exclusion of large portions of northern Sweden (see Appendix 8.1). The identification of (2) BM changes involved reviewing company documents and websites, focusing on finding potential transformation initiatives such as expanding into a year-round destination. The transformation was subsequently validated during the initial interview. We initially reached out to 19 ski resorts that were deemed as potential candidates, and ultimately, three resorts were able to offer us in-depth access, leading to the final sample for our study: case X, Y, and Z, whose case settings are presented in section 4.1. Lastly, a study period between 2005-2022 was established in consultation with the interviewees, as respondents marked 2005-2008 as the beginning of major BM changes.

3.2.3 Interviewee Sample

The selection of interviewees was based on a purposive sampling method, which involves selecting participants based on their relevance to the research topic, rather than being representative of a population, as this is in line with case study design (Robinson, 2014).

In all three cases, everyone involved in strategic decision-making was interviewed. During these interviews, we asked interviewees for contact to other knowledgeable parties which could be relevant to our research question (Bell et al., 2019). The number of interviews were not established from the outset but were conducted until saturation was reached, meaning we stopped when no new or relevant data emerged from participants (Bell et al., 2019). Once all interviews had been conducted, the research interest was slightly altered in line with the abductive approach of this study. The alteration in research interest led us to complement the initial round of interviews with additional perspectives from other actors in the ski resorts, such as the municipality and representatives from the destination company. As such, enabling a more nuanced understanding.

A total of 26 interviews were conducted, of which five were exploratory pre-study interviews and 21 were in-depth data collecting interviews (see Appendix 8.4). The average in-depth interview duration was 52 minutes, considered an appropriate length to avoid fatigue amongst the participants whilst still going in-depth (Adams, 2015).

3.2.4 Interview Process

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing for a high degree of flexibility and the uncovering of interesting topics for further discussion (Bell et al., 2019). This approach is particularly valuable when conducting comparative case study research, as the presence of some structure allows for cross-case comparison whilst still allowing interviewees to speak freely and new insights to be generated (Bell et al., 2019). Therefore, it was deemed appropriate for this study. In line with the semi-structured nature, we created an interview guide based on knowledge acquired in the pre-study and the initial research interest. The interview guide was not viewed as a strict script but rather a basis for discussion, in order for the uncovering of interesting novel aspects. During the initial interviews, it became apparent that many interviewees emphasised the importance of place and relationships with various actors in relation to their transformation. The interview guide was thus adjusted accordingly to capture these perspectives (see Appendix 8.6). This entailed going back-and-forth between the empirics and theory, described by Eisenhardt (1989) as the hallmark of building theory from case studies.

At the beginning of each interview, a brief small talk was initiated to establish rapport with the interviewee and ensure their comfort (Rubin, 2011). The interview then began with asking for permission to record, to which all interviewees agreed, and an introduction of the topic being discussed, followed by the main questions of the interview guide with room for follow-up questions. All in-depth interviews were conducted in Swedish as all participants had Swedish as a mother tongue and we thereby avoided any language barriers. Each interview was conducted individually in order to avoid group effects or social desirability bias (Bell et al., 2019), and all interview participants were informed of their anonymity prior to any questioning. Both of us were present at all interviews, with an alternation between asking questions and taking notes. This was done in order to prevent biased interpretations as well as take advantage of both of our perspectives and create a more dynamic conversation (Rubin, 2011). Finally, notes were taken during the interview as well as initial reflection directly after the interview, serving as a basis for the data analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis process began in parallel with the data collection, as interviews were carefully transcribed within 48 hours to ensure that all information was captured (Bell et al., 2019). As the study was conducted using an abductive approach, aiming to generate new theoretical findings, the data analysis method was inspired by grounded theory. Whilst the grounded theory approach was initially considered suitable for inductive studies, more recently scholars have argued for a strong fit with abductive studies, as grounded theory can use abduction to develop theory which is grounded in data and thereby has innovative potential (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Reichertz, 2009).

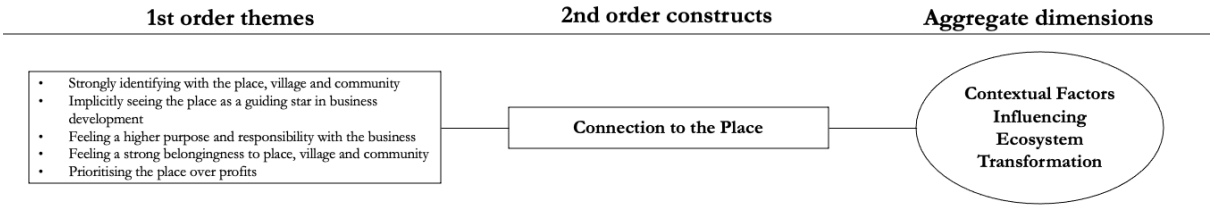
To enhance familiarity with the data, both of us, separately, read the raw data in detail once all interviews had been transcribed. We then each identified relevant themes and concepts as well as

notable quotes which may aid in answering the research question (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These steps were carried out independently by both of us in order to allow for the triangulation of insights and increase the validity of the findings (Denzin, 2012). Once familiarity with the data had been established, we began coding where we took inspiration from the three-level data analysis structure presented by Gioia et al. (2013).

In line with the grounded theory approach, we began by conducting within-case analysis before moving beyond the individual cases to a cross-case analysis (Flick, 2018). With three cases and an open-ended research question, we encountered a significant volume of unstructured data. Inspired by Gioia et al.'s (2013) three level-analysis, we began by identifying first-order themes using the language of the interviewees (Bell et al., 2019; Gioia et al., 2013). Following the creation of first-order themes, we created second-order constructs in which we combined our theoretical understanding with the empirical findings (Gioia et al., 2013; Corbin & Strauss 2008). Finally, we were able to condense the data further into aggregate dimensions. During this process, we observed that two cases (case X and Y) exhibited similar contextual characteristics regarding the integration of the ski operator with other local businesses. In contrast, the third case (case Z) differed in this aspect. To enhance clarity and derive meaningful insights, we decided to analyse the non-integrated resorts in comparison to the integrated resort[5]. This approach involved examining case X and Y collectively, whilst addressing case Z in a comparative manner.

We then moved on to the cross-case analysis in which we focused on identifying the key differences and similarities in data structures between non-integrated resorts and the integrated resort, in line with the comparative study design. Lastly, we synthesised a final data structure (see Appendix 8.7) representing the cases, exemplified in figure 4.

Figure 4. *Excerpt from Data Structure*



3.4 Ethical and Quality Considerations

3.4.1 Ethical Considerations

Several efforts were made to conduct this study in a responsible and respectful manner, with the interviewees and respective cases' rights in focus. This was particularly important as the cases are competitors in the same market and shared unique information to this study that they would not share directly with each other.

[5] See list of definitions

To comply with GDPR regulations, personal data such as name and gender were anonymised to maintain integrity. Only the most essential information about the company was included to avoid any potential harm from disclosure. If desired, interviewees were given the opportunity to view their transcripts to prevent any deception. For us to receive informed consent, the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, process, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time (Bell et al., 2019). Although anonymity and confidentiality were ensured from our side, they were informed about the risk of other actors possibly recognising characteristics that may potentially tie information to them, due to the fact that ski resorts differ in many ways that were considered important to raise. Thus, this constituted a balancing act between ensuring anonymity and transferability which is further discussed below.

3.4.2 Quality Considerations

To ensure the quality of our findings, we followed Guba & Lincoln's (1994) alternative ways for establishing and measuring reliability and validity. In line with the author's reasoning, this was considered appropriate given that this thesis takes on a critical stance where no single truth is believed (Bell et al., 2019).

Firstly, we actively worked to increase the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts, that is transferability. This was done by thick descriptions, whilst balancing with anonymity. Lincoln & Guba (1985) argue that thick descriptions and a detailed account of the context of the cases allows others to make a judgement about the transferability of the study. Therefore, whilst it was important to maintain the anonymity of the cases, we deemed it necessary to provide key details of the cases so that scholars and practitioners can understand the applicability of the study within other contexts (Geertz, 2008).

Secondly, we addressed the credibility of the study. The credibility is concerned with the internal validity, the extent to which the results appear to be an acceptable representation of the data (Bell et al., 2019). To increase the study's credibility, we engaged in triangulation and utilised multiple reference points as suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985). We conducted pre-study interviews along with in-depth interviews, as well as reviewed secondary sources such as websites and annual reports from the individual ski operators. This was further combined with reviewing industry reports and news articles. The triangulation of data enhanced the robustness of the study and thereby the validity of the findings (Flick, 2018). Additionally, at the end of each interview, we made sure to shortly present our understanding of the interviewees' responses which gave them a chance to develop or nuance our view given any misinterpretations.

Thirdly, we made sure to work on increasing the reliability of the research in terms of consistency of explanations, being systematic and traceable, that is dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To address the reliability, we provide a detailed account of the research process to ensure that our peers can monitor that proper procedures have been followed. Furthermore, the incorporation of appendices, such as the synthesised material, offered a more comprehensive account of the research process. This enhanced our transparency and, in turn, the reliability of the study.

Lastly, we took the following measures for increasing the degree to which interpretations are results of the participants, as opposed to our potential biases, that is conformability (Bell et al., 2019). To begin with, we turned to ourselves, considered our roles and defined personal values related to our research in order to become aware of our own biases that might influence our interpretations of the participants. As passionate skiers, we acknowledge our wish for the ski industry to transform in order to resist any external pressures and remain viable as a potential bias that may result in overstating transformative change. Similarly, the interviewees might be subject to social desirability bias, which refers to the tendency of answering questions in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others (Bell et al., 2019), which in this case could be to over-report their innovative initiatives and attribute most of it to themselves, as opposed to other actors in the ski resort. Furthermore, the risk of biased interpretation was reduced as we first coded and interpreted the data individually before discussing and combining our understandings. Along with this, triangulation further reduced the risk of biased results (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Together, these measures seeked to enhance the conformability of this study.

4. Empirical Results

The following section presents the empirical findings across the three resorts. We begin by providing (4.1) background to the resorts. Thereafter, we present (4.2) contextual factors influencing actions, followed by (4.3) how the resorts carried out transformation during the studied period.

4.1 Case Background

As noted, the ski resorts adopted two different approaches to operating their businesses. Firstly, cases X and Y pursued a so-called non-integrated approach, where the ski operators' focus revolved around managing ski-related activities such as operating lifts, ski school, equipment rental, and cycling during summer-time. Thus, leaving surrounding activities to be run by other local actors. Common for these cases was that the ski operators were located close to villages, where the majority of employees at the ski resort also lived. Furthermore, the ski operator together with 150+ local entrepreneurs and businesses operated under a destination company. This was described as a co-owned company where the members consolidated parts of marketing, booking, guest services, event planning, and destination development. The purpose of the company was for members to benefit from each other and gain negotiation power, ultimately, attracting more tourists to the resort.

> *"The destination company works as a small unifying party. Instead of having 150+ members who all speak individually, there is one party that has the big picture and can communicate the entire offering and negotiate."* – Y2

Contrastingly, the ski operator in case Z pursued an integrated approach where the ski operator managed almost all operations in the resort including accommodation, restaurants, shops, grocery store, and other facilities. Furthermore, case Z was developed from scratch on virgin territory to be a purpose-built ski resort. Operational staff were seasonally employed from all over Sweden and office staff were dispersed across the country, working either remotely or on-site. Pursuing this integrated approach was described as a deliberate choice for being able to control the offering.

> *"Since the beginning, the idea has been to know what guests receive and when things are open. [...] Others may choose to close a restaurant during a slow week and we wouldn't want that."* – Z2

Because cases X and Y share similar core characteristics, including their architecture and proximity to the village, they will be discussed collectively. Case Z will be addressed in a comparative manner. For clarity purposes, from this point forward, we refer to case X and Y as *village resorts,* and case Z *integrated resort*. Table 5 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the different cases.

Table 5. *Overview of Case Settings*

	Village Resorts		Integrated Resort
Ski Resort	**Case X**	**Case Y**	**Case Z**
Ski Resort Architecture	Non-integrated ski resort	Non-integrated ski resort	Integrated ski resort
Ownership	Privately-owned	Privately-owned	Privately-owned
Ski Operators Offering	Lift, ski school, rental, cycling	Lift, ski school, rental, cycling	Lift, ski school, rental, restaurants, accommodation, shops, grocery store etc.
Study Period	2005-2022	2005-2022	2005-2022
Key Focus of Transformation	Expansion into year-round activities	Expansion into year-round activities	Strengthening the winter-offering leveraging technologies and extending slopes
Projected Number of Days with Natural Snow (2021-2050)[6]	<100	<100	<100
Proximity to Village	Close	Close	Far
Season Focus	Year-round	Year-round	Winter
Part of Destination Company	Yes	Yes	No
Longevity of Business	35+ years	35+ years	35+ years
Number of Other Actors in the Ski Resort	High (150+)	High (150+)	Low

Complementary Data Sources: Company Websites (2023); Company Annual Reports (2022)[7]; Demiroglu et al. (2020)

4.2 Contextual Factors Influencing Ecosystem Transformation

The next section highlights key themes related to contextual factors that were identified as influential in guiding the actions and decisions made during transformations.

4.2.1 Integration of the Ski Operator

The ski operator's role and its connections with other actors were identified as influential factors in resort development. Common for all resorts, was that interviewees described the ski operators' as central for the economic viability of the nearby area and municipality. This was due to their primary role in attracting tourism to the region as well as supporting other businesses in the area, whilst also serving as a vital source of employment for the local community.

[6] See Appendix 8.1 for detailed map over possible geographical locations
[7] Not included in references to maintain anonymity

"The ski resort is the engine in our region. It has enabled people to live and operate throughout the municipality, which in turn opens up for various types of commerce, services, and crafts that can be available all year-round." – Y6

"Getting support from the ski operator is always what counts the most. I mean, when they put in a good word to the municipality for me to start my business, a process that usually takes months, only took a week. [...] If the ski operator supports something, it's in the entire municipality's interest." – X5

Yet, the ski operators' relationships with other actors within the resorts varied. In the village resorts, interviewees emphasised strong interdependence and resource-sharing between the ski operator and many local actors, wherein the destination companies facilitated active participation from all members:

"The destination company is our foundation, but then so much else happens. [...] The strength of being many smaller actors is that we can share information and help each other. [...] We collaborate in large and small: everything from the guide squeezing us [cyclepark] into their brochures to sharing staff with the restaurant." – X3

"The bike park doesn't get anyone to work without full-time employment, so they let people work part-time at the local restaurants as well. [...] And if a situation would appear where the staff is needed in both places at the same time, others are always keen on helping out and collaborate to find the best solution." – X5

Contrastingly, the integrated resort worked with their suppliers, the municipality, and a few local businesses (e.g., individual cabin owners). Apart from monthly to quarterly dialogues with these actors, interviewees described that they work independently as most operations were handled in-house including marketing and resort development:

"Well, given that we own most of the resort and that it's relatively depopulated, we work independently to a large extent. But then, our key partners are the providers of infrastructure, IT-services, and, of course, the municipality, which we talk to every now and then regarding expansion plans and land use." – Z3

4.2.2 Engagement with the Industry Association

All interviewees from the resorts regarded the industry association as a reputable and reliable actor that significantly contributed to facilitating change initiatives. All ski operators described that they participated in events and activities offered by the industry association, as well as voluntarily took on roles and actively participated in ongoing discussions:

"*The association has a long history within the industry – a lot of influential people work with the association so it's super credible…They've always stuck with the same core questions being very consistent which I think is good."* – Y5

"Having an association as a little hub is really valuable given the vast number of ski resorts in Sweden." – Z4

The industry association was further described as an important partner for educating and training employees. Interviewees emphasised that valuable information about trends, best-practices, and regulatory changes in the industry was shared, which led them to make more well–informed decisions:

> *"I've been on the board of the industry association for over 20 years now, and we have an incredible exchange of experience between resorts throughout the country. Not to mention education, where they [the association] offer training in safety, sustainability, and more, which is crucial for resort development."* – X2

Moreover, the association was described to create a valuable platform for finding opportunities. Interviewees referred to it as a *"neutral ground"* for members to interact with and learn from each other, allowing for the formation of new partnerships and collaborations:

> *"We have a great industry association which really drives resort development through knowledge-sharing. Through meetings and events, they create an arena for ski operators to meet. Of course, we can also make study visits on our own... but via the association, we interact on neutral ground in a way."* – X3

> *"Several collaborations have been borned through SLAO. We have, for example, a booking system that about thirty other ski resorts also are using, and through SLAO, we created a network together with three others where we drive development to benefit our system compared to other actors."* – Z2

Lastly, the association was described as setting standards for the industry. Interviewees mentioned that whilst the association only provided recommendations, the resorts almost always followed them. Interviewees particularly mentioned the role of the association in business development related to security, sustainability, and technology.

> *"The association has recommendations, we don't have to follow them, but we do. Of course, we also have our own ideas and vision for the resort, but SLAO is very important and we often start from what they are saying."* – Z4

4.2.3 Relationships with Other Actors

As noted, the type of relationships between actors within the resorts differed, where the village resorts in general had more personal relationships and the integrated resort more formal.

In the village resort, interviewees described that they felt tightly interwoven with the local businesses. This was observed as they shared critical resources, supported and spurred each other to improve, and interacted extensively through both formal and informal gatherings. Interviewees acknowledged their enduring connections and mutual support, oftentimes rooted in their long-standing relationships, which supported knowledge-sharing:

> *"We have numerous opportunities for gatherings, both formal and informal, such as entrepreneur breakfasts, casual lunches [...]. There's no need to pre-register or anything: these are just places where people*

can meet. This lowers the barrier for sharing information and it gets people involved. Even before we began constructing the paddle hall, about a year prior, people were already aware of our plans to build it." – X5

"We've known each other for a long time. I could call her [municipality-representative] on a Friday night and know that she would always be there for me. Of course I wouldn't do it [laughs], but it has been very comforting during times of great change when things can easily go wrong and you need to fix things fast, you know. There are no real barriers there." – Y2

In addition, the interviewees described their high interdependence on each other. One interviewee illustrated this by saying:

"As a local entrepreneur, I'm completely dependent on the ski slope. During spring and autumn, we barely cover our costs, or well, we might be in the red for a month or two, but right after midsummer, both the number of bookings and customer growth peaks again." – X5

In contrast, the integrated resort, which worked independently, further described its relationships as more transactional and communication occurred only when needed:

"Well... we have a sea of different partners we work with… suppliers for lift systems, properties, food, security equipment, and IT, to mention some… But we're hiring them, and when we need something, we simply pay for it." – Z3

4.2.4 Connection to the Place

All interviewees in the village resorts highlighted an identification with the place as an important guiding star in resort development. Contrastingly, interviewees in the integrated resort, which was located outside and standalone to a village, did not mention this at all. Interviewees in the village resorts often referred to a sense of belongingness to the place:

"This place is the anchor in everything we do, it kind of focuses everyone's attention in the same direction somehow." – X3

The connection to the place was in line with a sense of pride and wanting to honour the history and the tradition of the resort.

"The village has developed and thrived thanks to tourism. Because of this, there has been a collective drive to preserve and ensure the survival of this place. Much of the work done 40 years ago is bearing fruit today, with a strong entrepreneurial spirit, cohesion, and forward-thinking." – X1

Moreover, interviewees in the village resort illustrated a shared purpose for developing the resort, beyond solely monetary incentives. Particularly, the desire to create an attractive place for themselves as well as tourists to come visit with an authentic feeling was considered important:

"We aim to increase revenue for better regional development. There is a higher purpose than just saying 'Well, I'm going to get rich on this'. Then you should do something completely different, because that will never happen here." – X3

"I've lived here all my life and our greatest asset is the authenticity of this place, that is, you come to a place with a tradition of untouched nature, genuine hospitality – and I feel like it unites us all." – Y7

Lastly, interviewees further described that the place made them feel connected to each other, without having to know each other too well.

"Many ski resorts are situated in remote locations, often only surrounded by forests or large parking lots, you know. But with us, the whole local community is connected, which brings us together in a very special and unique way – the people, place and commercial beds are one." – X2

"Of course I don't know all the members, but I feel that we understand each other anyway. We have chosen this place, which most likely means that we share the same passion for skiing, the mountain, and this life. I assume most people here value and want the same things, and…we will meet at the local grocery store anyway so we better keep a nice tone [laughs]." – Y1

On the other hand, the interviewees from the integrated resort did not mention this connection nor used the same kind of personal or emotional language when they described the goals and motivations with their business.

"The goal is always to create a better product whilst spending less money, which is really the best way to increase profits. That way, we can develop new things, similar to Gröna Lund, where we want to launch new attractions to keep the guests coming. That's why we have to generate a profit every year." – Z1

"We are driven by a desire to grow because it's more cost-efficient to operate a larger ski resort." – Z4

4.3 Actions in the Transformation Process

This section presents empirical findings highlighting notable similarities and differences in the resorts' transformations. We begin with presenting firm-level activities and progress to ecosystem-level. The findings reveal distinct approaches, where the village resorts have evolved into year-round destinations, whilst the integrated resort focused on enhancing its ski offering.

4.3.1 Involvement of Perspectives

When exploring opportunities, the degree to which ski operators involved other perspectives differed significantly. However, most interviewees emphasised the valuable role of the industry association in supporting resort development as well as inspirational study visits to other resorts as a common practice for generating ideas:

"Personally, I visit at least ten new resorts each year, a tradition I've had for over 30 years, and even more so now. These visits allow me to listen, feel, think, and gather ideas for our own resort." – X2

"I remember that SLAO helped us greatly in guiding us on what to consider and what not to when we started exploring how to enhance our offering, and still do." – Y2

Other than listening to the industry association, village resorts stood out for their notable employee engagement across various levels, as well as other resort actors, during business development. Interviewees described that this approach aimed to ensure that all opinions within the ski resort were heard and capture valuable ideas:

"Y2 and Y3 generate the ideas, and I'm responsible for figuring out how to execute them [laughs]. Sometimes, the ideas can be quite bold, but I must admit that I would've never dared to expand into summer-activities on my own, so I owe them that." – Y1

"No one is keeping anything secret and just sitting on a bunch of plans without telling. People throw out their ideas, ask, and engage others during our meetings; 'I'm thinking about this, does anyone have any ideas? Speak up if you do!' That's one of the best things about this place, the inclusiveness." – X3

In contrast, the interviewees from the integrated resort described limited involvement with business development, as these activities were confined to a board-level where the strategy was set:

"I may not be the right person to provide insights on the business development process as I'm [Head of Communication] not present in the management team or board where those discussions take place." – Z6

"Why we started working with sustainability? Well… because the CEO said so [laughs]. But I also think it's great, we have a CEO who understands that the environment is important." – Z4

Furthermore, interviewees from the integrated resort mentioned a comparatively slower process for generating ideas and launching new business development initiatives:

"Developing our sustainability profile, extending the slopes, and digitalising equipment-rental have progressed gradually since about 2005. It sounds like it has been slow [laughs], but you know, it's a process to get everything approved and going." – Z3

4.3.2 Higher Purpose versus Business Orientation

The motivation for business development also differed between the village resorts and the integrated resort, with different emphasis on the presence of a higher purpose when seeking opportunities. Several interviewees in the village resorts explicitly referred to this, whereas others expressed a strong desire to contribute to the long-term growth and well-being of the resort. This commitment was especially mentioned as a motivation for their sustainability initiatives and year-round development efforts, where they emphasised going above and beyond the minimum requirements to enhance the ski resort for the betterment of all local residents:

"It's not sustainable to only have hotels open, for example, three months a year, and the same goes for cabins and restaurants. We want the whole community to thrive all year-round. That's why we invest in activities in the summer, spring, autumn, and winter." – X2

"*We chose to do it ourselves [implement a sustainability certification]. We already do a lot of great things, but this was a way to make our sustainability stand-point even more distinct."* – X1

In contrast, the integrated resort primarily evaluated new initiatives based on their potential for generating profits for the ski operator. This was described as the primary motivation for solely focusing on winter-products:

"We've thought about summer, but it's currently not worth it, so we stick with what we do best, and try to do it even better. Profit-wise, we believe we make more money during a winter sports break week than we do during a whole summer, really [...]. It's all about balancing to stay profitable." – Z6

4.3.3 Time Perspective

Based on the aforementioned distinct motivations, the interviewees also highlighted different time perspectives when assessing business opportunities. In the village resort, there was a frequent emphasis on the significance of developing the ski resort not just for present gains but also for the benefit of past and future generations. For instance, interviewees expressed an aspiration to maintain the authentic atmosphere of the resort building on history, as well as ensuring that their children would want to grow up and choose to live there:

"So, for me, it's about the resort being a good place to grow up, live, and operate for us, our children, and our friends. We want our children to grow up and feel like this is a great place to live and thrive, that's our driving force." – X2

"The legacy of this place is really important to us. We want to maintain its authenticity, not just turning it into some kind of amusement park, like others." – Y1

Adopting this longer-term perspective, together with higher purpose, was described to trigger a strong drive to responsibly manage the resort, place, and local community. Interviewees mentioned strong commitments to environmental considerations and seemed to more favourably assess the opportunity to invest in summer-activities:

"At first, the idea of year-round operations was brought up by my adventurous friends who had seen ski resorts abroad successfully implementing such things. Though it seemed challenging, we considered the potential of benefiting the entire village and saw it as an opportunity!" – X2

"I would say that it's the belongingness and the fact that we live so close to nature that fuel our strong commitment to contribute to sustainability." – Y5

Interestingly, the same perception of time was not observed in the integrated resort, as interviewees focused on short- to mid-term revenue growth:

> *"Growth is in our DNA, and to be able to, we need to make money during the peak season."* – Z5

4.3.4 Changes to the Business Model

Although all resorts described that they have invested in artificial snow-making, increased efforts to become more sustainable, and to varying degrees leveraged digital technologies during the studied time period, the resorts have chosen fundamentally different approaches. Interestingly, the village resorts have embraced year-round offerings, whilst the integrated resort has focused on further strengthening its core winter-offering, despite similar levels of reported as well as perceived vulnerability to climate change:

> *"I'm worried, of course. Our greatness is the proximity to Mälardalen, but it's also our biggest disadvantage when considering climate change, as we're quite far south."* – X5

> *"Considering climate change, the snow production window will shrink further, resulting in fewer days with natural snow on the ground, shortening our season. We're aware of this fact and see that we must generate more revenue within a shorter time frame."* – Z3

In village resorts, the expansion to summer-activities was described to require significant changes to the BM such as large up-front investments, re-allocating resources, handling more diverse revenue flows, and seeking external expertise to develop trails. Additionally, the expansion required training employees and forming new partnerships to ensure successful implementation:

> *"The transition was tough, and we had doubts about its feasibility. But with the help of the Canadians [external support team], skilled staff, reliable builders, good collaboration and on-site management, progress began. Now, we stand here as a transformed version of ourselves. A lot better if you ask me!"* – X3

> *"Whilst using the same mountain and lifts, the transition has required significant changes in the way we work. We've gone from quiet to lively summers."* – Y3

Interviewees from the village resorts further emphasised an openness amongst actors, where employees felt safe to share bold ideas and think innovatively. The support interviewees received from others in the resort encouraged risk-taking, as interviewees described that this encouragement boosted their confidence to take chances:

> *"It's an incredibly creative and fantastic team here. You can express any idea without the fear of it being dismissed. Everything is given serious consideration and further discussion, and there is always space for unconventional ideas, so to speak."* – Y3

"We initially had doubts about people already being busy, the customer demand, and the cost involved. However, a friend gave us a kick in the butt and just told us to do it and stop over-thinking. That really helped us take the leap." – Y1

In contrast, on top of the common development for all resorts, the business development in the integrated resort was solely focused on improving the core offering of skiing. For instance, interviewees described leveraging digitalisation and expanding slopes to enhance the customer experience and grow the business:

"We're in the forefront of digitalisation and amongst the first to allow customers to order equipment, pick-up cabin keys, and lift-passes using their phones. So we are devoting much attention to reducing queues, streamlining rentals, and basically lowering the barrier for customers to come and visit." – Z4

"We've had a clear direction to improve our core offering, and increase the amount of slopes and lifts in our systems. So, the BM itself hasn't undergone significant change over time, but our offering has improved with the same underlying logic." – Z3

Table 6 provides an overview of the most described changes to the ski operators' BMs, also indicating their primary focus.

Table 6. *Overview of BM Changes (Non-exhaustive)*

BM Change	**Village Resorts**	**Integrated Resort**	**Example Activities**
Investment in Artificial Snow-making	●	●	• Investing into artificial snow-making machines • Expanding automatic snow-systems
Sustainability Work	●	●	• Investing into renewable energy sources • Purchasing sustainable fuel • Using electricity driven snow-scooters • Nudging customers • Making waste management facilities available
Expansion to a Year-round Destination (*summer)*	●	Not pursued	• Investing into hiking and cycling trails • Hiring external experts • Training of existing employees • Hiring of new employees for summer season • Maintaining year-round lift operations
Improvement of Core Offering (*winter)* by Leveraging Digital Technologies	○	●	• Setting up online services for equipment rental, lift tickets • Streamlining pickup of equipment and cabin keys by online services • Streamlining website and booking system
Improvement of Core Offering (*winter)* by Expanding Slopes	○	●	• Extending with new slopes • Improving experience in existing slopes • Purchasing new lifts

● - Indicates strong or primary focus during study period; ○ - Indicates sporadic development but not a primary focus; Note that the assessment is illustrative

4.3.5 Actors Commitment to Develop

The following sections direct attention to the activities centred around coordinating the observed initiatives during the study period, which varied significantly. To begin with, interviewees from the village resorts expressed a strong commitment to developing the resorts and actively contributing. This was evident in collaborative efforts and joint problem-solving, where interviewees highlighted a willingness of others to offer assistance, even if it did not directly benefit them:

> "*The collaboration amongst actors has always been strong, but it is even stronger since we introduced summer. [...] Two restaurants quickly became seven, but the helpful attitude still persists. For instance, if a restaurant doesn't receive a wine delivery on a busy Friday, they can always borrow from each other. It's not about seizing the opportunity to sell more, we're always eager to help out.*" – X5

> *"When times have been challenging, for instance during COVID-19 where the number of guests declined, there's been a collective drive motivating people to step out of their homes and unite for the betterment of the community, which have been very helpful in this journey."* – X1

In contrast, as mentioned earlier, interviewees below the board level in the integrated resort did not express the same level of emotional attachment to their work. They appeared satisfied with taking a backseat in the transformation process, as they rarely questioned or gave input to the overall direction:

> *"Our CEO is skilled at setting directives, and I recognise the economic benefits of enhancing our current offering. So, it's like they handle their responsibilities, and I handle mine."* – Z1

4.3.6 Ease of Coordination

The ease of coordination amongst actors in the resorts further varied. Despite the large number of actors in the village resorts, the process of coordinating around year-round expansion was described as relatively seamless. Whilst the destination company established a shared vision for sustainability standards to guide members, the resort actors described that they largely developed their own practices, standards, and ways of working. This was facilitated by a sense of shared interest with others in the resort:

> *"The destination company helped uniting us all under one roof when it came to sustainability-thinking, but beyond that, we coordinated ourselves quite a lot. It came naturally for us, who are used to taking matters into our own hands and being proactive."* – X2

> *"We're already aligned in our thinking, so it was and is rather easy to come together, as we're often aligned."* – Y5

These interviewees further highlighted the extensive interdependence created by resource-sharing amongst actors, including staff and infrastructure. This collaborative approach to working, which was considered essential, was described as further contributing to shared goals:

"The summer and winter teams share staff, lifts, parking lots, trains, cabins – you name it. And the success of surrounding activities also relies on our efforts to attract tourists. Our work during winter spills over to summer, benefiting other businesses, and it keeps going in a cycle. Basically, we needed each other on this journey! [laughs]" – X3

"Working in this way has made it in everyone's interest to develop this resort and actively participate. We all bake and eat the cake, so to speak" – Y2

"Resort X's journey is a fascinating example of how ski operators collaborate with the local community for great results. It shows the important role of the community in transitioning, as all parties rely on each other for success." – XYZ1

Similarly, interviewees from the integrated resort found that coordination around its initiatives, such as digitalisation and slope expansion, was relatively smooth. This was attributed to the limited involvement of other actors in these projects. However, they encountered challenges in their relationship with the municipality, as their demands sometimes exceeded what the ski operator was willing to commit to during the time, leading to occasional frustrations. Continuous formal discussions occurred throughout the study period, guided by the so-called long-term development plan that all municipalities establish for ski resorts. The relationship between the ski resort and the municipality focused more on the plan's guidelines rather than personal interactions:

"Our dialogues are guided by the detailed plan we have for the land where their ski resort is located. It's quite extensive, around 20 pages or so." – Z7

"Previously, ski lifts could be built almost anywhere, but now stricter requirements and municipal approval are needed. Whilst it hasn't affected our digitalisation, it has slowed down the expansion of our ski slopes. Requests that used to take a week to process now require more time, up to 1.5 years. Making coordination somewhat more difficult." – Z1

4.3.7 Adoption Amongst Other Actors

During more recent years when the initiatives had come into place, interviewees across the resorts described how they continuously worked to enhance their offerings to improve customer satisfaction. Common practices included collecting customer surveys, engaging with customers, continuing doing inspirational study visits, partaking in the industry association, and testing new ideas by tweaking their offerings slightly:

"We keep on listening to our guests by asking them outright and sending surveys to capture feedback." – Z3

"We're never standing still and like to experiment with new things continuously. Last summer, we arranged a concert up in the mountains which was very appreciated." – Y2

Different however was the need for the ski operator to actively engage employees and other resort actors into contributing to the continuous development. In village resorts, the continuous development process was described in line with previous observations of how coordination reinforced itself. Although the ski operators supported the business development of the entire ski resorts, their presence was not necessary for things to happen:

> *"The quality standards keep getting higher for everyone here, all on its own. Businesses stay open year-round, getting better at what they do and attracting more businesses to establish. It's just how things have naturally evolved, making everyone more professional without anyone needing to tell them to."* – X1

Contrastingly, in the integrated ski resort, management actively engaged in driving improvement projects by assigning specific employees to identify opportunities in sustainability, digitalisation, safety, and slope improvements. Both employees and suppliers, along with the few local businesses owners, adopted a cautious approach in line with the standards that seemed to have been established in the resort during and even prior to this study period:

> *"I've been working on multiple projects this year. Right now I'm assigned to a project, where I'm looking into how we can further streamline the customer journey."* – Z4

> *"Usually, the management takes the lead in initiating and will likely continue to do so in most development initiatives. They are doing it well, I think."* – Z5

5. Analysis

The following section analyses the empirical findings in light of the theoretical framework. The analysis begins by (5.1) examining the network position of each resort, thereafter analysing how it influences (5.2) actions throughout the transformation process. Lastly, we present our (5.3) conclusions.

5.1 Network Embeddedness

The following sections aim to position each resort type – village resorts and the integrated resort – with respect to structural and relational embeddedness, as outlined by Gnyawali & Madhavan (2001), as well as discuss the two additional influential factors that emerged from the empirical findings.

5.1.1 Structural Embeddedness

Considering structural embeddedness, two main themes emerged as influencing transformation: the *structural position* and the industry association, below conceptualised as *intermediary*. The former was expected as it goes in line with implications put forward by scholars (e.g., Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001; Burt, 1995; Granovetter, 1985). However, the significant role of the industry association is a factor that has received less attention in examined literature and was thus more surprising.

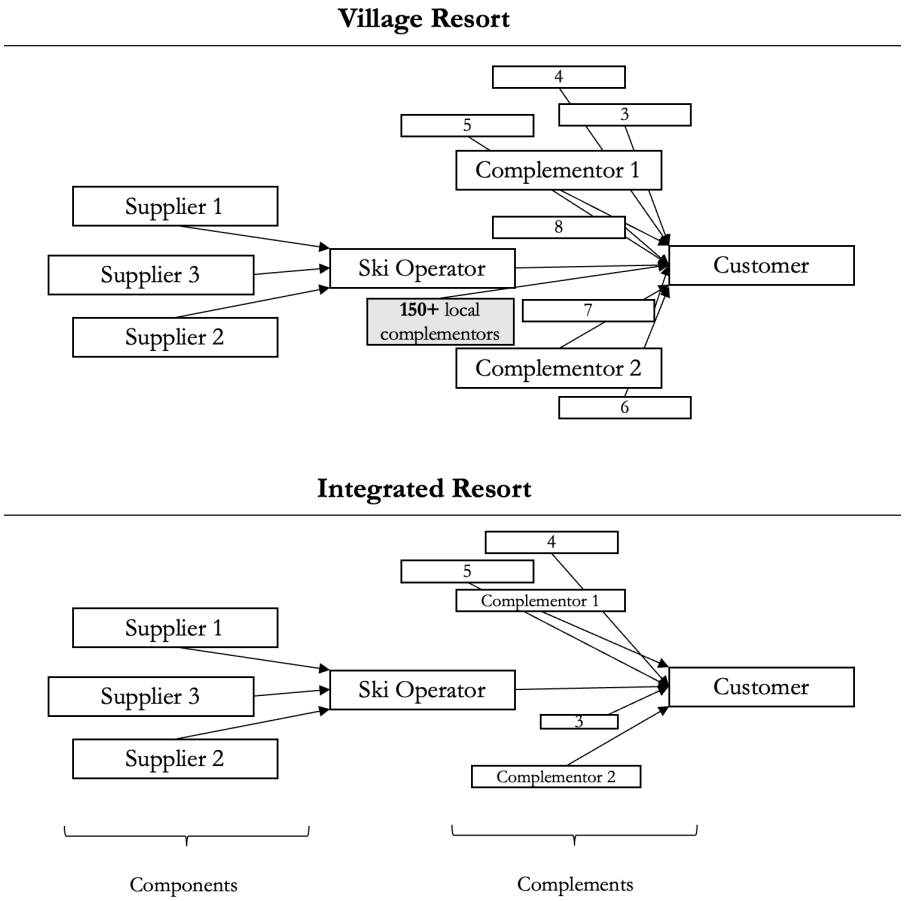
Structural position. To begin with, the focal firms in the village resorts were well-connected in the network, corresponding to high centrality. Furthermore, collaboration amongst actors was not limited to the destination company alone, as it also occurred through individual relationships or through informal gatherings including *"casual lunches"* (X5). Additionally, the actors demonstrated high levels of resource-commitment, such as consolidated marketing activities and shared employees, resulting in significant interconnectedness amongst actors, which corresponds to high density and the absence of large structural holes (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001). Lastly, empirical findings indicate that the ski operators held unique positions in both of the resorts, as they were well-connected, carefully listened to, and the most influential actor, indicating that no other firm shared similar network patterns. Thus, no structural equivalents are present in these networks.

The integrated resort differed in many structural facets, largely explained by their contrasting approach to ownership. Since the focal firm operated almost all businesses in the resort, except small private accommodations, the number of actors in its network was significantly lower. The focal firm's connections were mainly represented in suppliers and customers, with a limited number of complementors (figure 5). Apart from instances when they needed to buy services or negotiate with institutions, the ski operator remained predominantly focused on internal affairs, with minimal engagement in external relationships. Consequently, corresponding to low levels of centrality as well as density. This is due to the focal firm's limited involvement in other connections, as well as the overall lack of interconnectedness between actors in the network as a

whole (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001). Furthermore, no structural equivalents are present. Finally, according to the interviewees, external actors such as the municipality and the infrastructure supplier were not directly connected to each other, revealing presence of holes in the network.

Empirical findings show that the structural positions of each firm influenced, more or less, all phases of transformation, further substantiated in section 5.2.

Figure 5. *Illustrative*[8] *Schema of Village Resorts & Integrated Resort*



Intermediary. In addition to the structural factors identified by Gnyawali & Madhavan (2001), the findings reveal the significant role of the industry association. Being positioned close to this actor provided opportunities for education and knowledge-sharing, which in turn, shaped the way ski resorts chose to develop. Consequently, this influenced a firm's access to economic opportunities, resonating with the mechanisms of structural embeddedness (Uzzi, 1996). To enhance theoretical understanding, we conceptualise the industry association as an *intermediary* which we define as *the degree to which actors have access to external bodies or forums working in the interest of all participants to facilitate knowledge-sharing.*

The empirical findings align with previous research (e.g., Uzzi, 1996), highlighting the complex interconnections amongst the factors of structural embeddedness. Although no distinct connection to specific factors could be discerned from the study, an intermediary was found to

[8] Note that sizes and number of boxes only are illustrative

have a significant influence on firm's structural positions in their networks. We argue that an intermediary is theoretically distinct from the factors, but can influence a firm's structural embeddedness, either directly or via one or several factors. For example, by providing valuable knowledge, an intermediary was observed to enhance a firm's ability to coordinate and connect with other actors, increasing centrality and network density. Although not limited to, empirical findings indicate that intermediaries mostly influence a firm's structural embeddedness. Conceptually an intermediary is not bound to an industry association but can also constitute alliances or other organisations aligning with our proposed definition.

Empirical findings show that accessing an intermediary played a significant role in enhancing structural embeddedness, which had a notable influence on the exploration phase with respect to *breadth* and *incentives*, further analysed in section 5.2.1. Table 7 provides an overview of the resorts' structural positions.

Table 7. *Overview of Structural Positions*

Factor	Centrality	Density	Holes	Equivalence	Intermediary
Village Resorts	High	High	Not many	None	High
Integrated Resort	Low	Low	Many	None	High

5.1.2 Relational Embeddedness

Considering relational embeddedness, two main themes emerged from the empirics: *relational position* and *local identification*. The former finding was anticipated, as it is consistent with literature (Granovetter, 2005; Rowley et al., 2000; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). However, the latter finding, which is less prominent in previous literature, was more surprising.

Relational position. In village resorts, interviewees emphasise extensive collaboration through partnerships and informal social gatherings, aligning with Wulf & Butel's (2017) notion that spending time together fosters high-quality ties. Additionally, interviewees described that some relations had been in place for a long time, resulting in high levels of trust. Lastly, the focal firms were described to support other resort actors as well as show strong emotional commitment to resort development as a whole. Thus, demonstrating emotional intensity, as Rowley et al. (2000) characterise strong ties. Altogether, focal firms within village resorts are considered as having high-quality ties.

In the integrated resort, their independent position and formal relationships indicate lower relational embeddedness compared to the village resorts (Granovetter, 2005). Whilst the focal firm engaged in recurring dialogues with suppliers and institutions there were limited interactions with other actors in their network. These interactions were also more transactional in nature, despite having fewer actors to interact with. Consequently, the focal firm is considered having predominantly lower-quality relationships.

Empirical findings show that the relational position of each firm influenced, more or less, all phases of transformation, further substantiated in section 5.2.

Local identification. In addition to direct actor-to-actor relationships, individuals' connection to the same place was found to strengthen the characteristics associated with high-quality ties. This was evident in the village resorts, but lacking in the integrated resort. The significance of its impact was surprising as the role of place predominantly has been discussed in entrepreneurial ecosystems recognising that close proximity can promote knowledge-sharing (Mathias et al., 2021; Smith & Stevens, 2010). However, our findings go beyond physical proximity to also include the emotional layer of identifying oneself with the place. This involved resonating with its history, traditions, connecting with the natural environment, community, and embracing the local lifestyle. We refer to this as *local identification*, and we define it as *the degree to which actors in a network identify with the same place, community, and lifestyle*.

Interviewees with a strong local identification tended to form relationships characterised by higher degrees of emotional intensity, reciprocity, and trust. These characteristics align with Granovetter's (2005) definition of high-quality ties and support Smith and Stevens' (2010) findings of the significance of physical proximity in contributing to strong social connections. Furthermore, local identification was strongly associated with a sense of responsibility towards managing the place and preserving the authentic lifestyle of the community. Consequently, empirics show that strong local identification fostered high-quality ties through triggering a sense of belongingness and shared responsibility towards the place, community and lifestyle. For instance, Y1 explained how connecting to the place created shared understanding and aligned interests, even without knowing all members of the destination company. Consequently, further showing that strong local identification can foster strong ties without the need for engaging in time-consuming relationship-building. This nuances theory as Granovetter (2005) argues that strong connections are fostered by interaction.

Empirical findings show that local identification influenced actions in the village resorts throughout the transformation process. Particularly, when navigating the exploration with respect to *incentives* and *temporal orientation*, as well as the orchestration with respect to *commitment* and *alignment of interest,* further discussed next in section 5.2. Table 8 provides an overview of the relational positions of the resorts.

Table 8. *Overview of Relational Positions*

Factor	Quality of Ties	Local Identification
Village Resorts	High	High
Integrated Resort	Low	Low

5.2 Actions in the Transformation Process

The next section explores the influence of embeddedness on the three phases of ecosystem transformation. We begin by examining the influence at the (5.2.1) firm-level, and then progress to the (5.2.2) ecosystem-level.

5.2.1 Firm-level

From the analysis, four main themes emerged when identifying how the context influenced firm-level actions during their transformations. These were *breadth, incentives, temporal orientation,* and *scope of innovation.* The first and the last were not surprising. Although not explicitly articulated, these are in line with what literature implies (e.g., Wulf & Butel, 2017; Granovetter, 1985; Amit & Zott, 2012). However, both *incentives* and *temporal orientation* are considered unanticipated findings, as they are less salient in existing literature, particularly the strong influence from local identification.

5.2.1.1 Exploration

Breadth. In village resorts, focal firms heavily relied on complementors for being able to initiate the transformation. Thus, both external actors and internal employees at all levels were involved in exploration activities, allowing for a wider range of perspectives in *discovering the VP*. Additionally, the access to the intermediary supported in setting standards for opportunity assessment as well as enabled the focal firms to make more well-informed decisions through *network learning*, based on insights from training and knowledge-sharing. Together, this led the focal firms in the village resorts to receive greater access to diverse perspectives during *visioning* and *VP discovery*, ultimately triggering wider exploration. This supports Granovetter's (1985) argument that high centrality can lead to greater access to valuable information and opportunities.

Contrastingly, whilst the integrated resort also engaged with the intermediary, it concentrated *visioning* and *VP discovery* to a narrow group. Consequently, they limited involvement from both external actors and internal employees, as the process was predominantly conducted on a board-level. Despite high competence amongst board members, empirical findings support Granovetter's (2005) theorising that a lack of access to ideas outside the inner social circle can hinder firms from breaking away from established routines and practices. This as the integrated resort was highly committed to continue the business in line with the past trajectory, and paid less attention to opportunities outside their core offering. Consequently, low network density was observed to not only constrain collaboration amongst actors in a network in line with Rowley et al. (2000), but also within the focal firm. This suggests a link between a firm's position in a network and its practices for internal collaboration, which goes beyond theory. Thus, being strongly embedded, with high centrality in a dense network, along with the involvement of an intermediary, led to more perspectives being included in the exploration phase.

Incentives. Interviewees from village resorts expressed a strong commitment to a greater cause, prioritising long-term sustainability over personal or business gains. As a result, the focal firms in

village resorts considered business opportunities contributing to the long-term health of the ecosystem and the community welfare more favourably during *visioning*. For instance, through strong commitment to sustainability and favourable views on year-round expansion. This exemplifies the essence of embeddedness theory, wherein social connections influence firms to undertake actions that extend beyond purely economic factors (Granovetter, 1985). Whilst social ties are known to influence firm incentives, strong local identification was seen as strengthening this effect, which is interesting. Thus, feeling a strong local identification led firms to a greater extent assess business opportunities based on non-economic incentives.

Temporal orientation. The empirical findings further demonstrate how embeddedness can foster a sense of responsibility towards past and future generations in business decisions. This was evident amongst interviewees in the village resorts, who emphasised keeping authenticity whilst innovating to create a good place for next generations. Hence, a strong local identification added an interesting time-perspective, where the focal firms to a greater extent applied an intergenerational perspective to exploration activities, hence, considered a longer time perspective. Although scholars have found that high-quality ties foster stronger collaboration and shared interest (Wulf & Butel 2017), this finding is noteworthy as previous literature largely has overlooked the link between the perception of time. In contrast, the integrated resort did not sense a local identification in the same manner, and was centred around short to medium-term revenue growth that is more strongly driven by economic incentives. As such, none of the interviewees in the integrated resort alluded to an intergenerational perspective. Altogether, empirical findings show that local identification can influence firms to increasingly adopt an intergenerational perspective when engaging in exploration activities. This further extends to their BMI, which will be analysed next.

Scope of innovation. The village resorts exhibited not only innovation to single elements, but also interlinks, through the expansion to become a year-round destination. Introducing summer-activities involved high degrees of novelty to strongly interconnected elements of their BM. This impacted particularly diversification of revenue streams (profit model), significant investment in infrastructure (resources) and new ways of creating value to customers (VP). BMI in village resorts is thereby characterised as radical rather than incremental given their novelty and scope (Foss & Saebi, 2017; Souto, 2015). These findings support theorising by Rowley et al. (2000) suggesting that denser networks facilitate collaboration and generate greater access to various sources of information, which in turn can trigger more radical change. Furthermore, the findings reveal established norms and practices promoting mutual support in the focal firms collaboration, even in the early transformation-phases. This contrasts with prevailing ecosystem studies where standards are typically established during the stabilisation phase (e.g., Kolgar et al., 2022). Having these norms in place enabled actors to seek help and encouraged risk-taking. This resonates with Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998), suggesting that high-quality connections create stronger social control mechanisms that, in our study, show to be enabling. Our findings thus demonstrate how social control mechanisms can foster more radical innovation, by having norms that encourage bold ideas in place already during exploration.

Contrastingly, the integrated resort focused on innovation in mostly infrastructure and digital assets, hence continuously developing primarily resources and VP. The focus has thus rather been

to change specific elements of the BM, without requiring significant modifications to its interlinks, corresponding to more incremental innovation (Foss & Saebi, 2017; Souto, 2015). Thus, insights from Uzzi (1996) suggesting that low-quality ties have the potential to initiate radical change, were not observed. Hence, our empirical findings highlight the importance of actively involving weak ties to leverage novel information effectively. Essentially, firms need to actively participate in relationships characterised by weak ties and carefully consider their input. Such engagement was lacking in the integrated resort. To summarise, our findings indicate that higher levels of embeddedness can promote risk-taking, which in turn can drive firms to pursue more radical innovation. Table 9 provides an overview of the observed approaches in the aspects of exploration.

Table 9. *Overview of Resorts Orientations in Aspect (Firm-level)*

Firm-level Aspects	**Breadth**	**Incentives**	**Temporal orientation**	**Scope of innovation**
Village resorts				
Orientation	Wider	Non-economic	Intergenerational	Radical
Exemplary Quote	*"No one is keeping anything secret and just sitting on a bunch of plans without telling. People throw out their ideas, ask, and engage others during our meetings."* – X3	*"We want the whole community to thrive all year-round for the foreseeable future. So we invested in activities in the summer, spring, autumn, and winter."* – X2	*"We want our children to grow up and feel like this is a great place to live and thrive, that's our driving force."* – X2	*"Whilst using the same mountain and lifts, the transition has required significant changes in the way we work. We've gone from quiet to lively summers."* – Y3
Highlighted by	X2, X3, Y1, Y2	X1, X2, X3, Y7	X2, X5, Y1, Y5	X3,Y1, Y3
Integrated resort				
Orientation	Narrower	Economic	Present	Incremental
Exemplary Quote	*"I may not be the right person to provide insights on the business development process as I'm not present in the management team or board discussions where those discussions take place."* – Z6	*"Profit-wise, we believe we make more money during a winter sports break week than we do during a whole summer, really [...]. It's all about balancing to stay profitable."* – Z6	*"Growth is in our DNA, and to be able to, we need to make money during the peak season."* – Z5	*"We've had a clear direction to improve our core offering. So, the BM itself hasn't undergone significant change over time."* – Z3
Highlighted by	Z3, Z4, Z6	Z1, Z2, Z4, Z6	Z5, Z2, Z6	Z3, Z4

Orientations are indicated in comparison to the other resort type and should not be viewed independently or in absolute terms. E.g., "economic" refers to that the resort to a larger extent considered economic incentives in exploration, compared to the other resort.

5.2.2 Ecosystem-level

5.2.2.1 Orchestration

When analysing ecosystem orchestration, the context influenced the process in two main ways: the level of *commitment* from other actors in the ecosystem to transform and the degree of *interest alignment* amongst actors. Whilst the latter was expected as it aligns with existing literature (Wulf & Butel, 2017; Rowley et al., 2000; Uzzi, 1996), the former was unanticipated as it is less prominent in current research.

Commitment. Similar patterns of incentives and temporal orientation observed in the focal firms could be seen amongst ecosystem actors at the point where they were involved in the transformations. In village resorts, actors embraced the idea of transitioning to a year-round destination and showed strong emotional commitment to contribute to the shared implicit goals of supporting the local village. They voluntarily attended informal and formal meetings, supported other local businesses when in need, as well as actively participated in *coordination* of resources and knowledge-sharing to contribute. Thus, high-quality ties facilitated collaboration, in line with Wulf & Butel (2017). In the integrated resort, this high commitment amongst external actors was not observed. The rather few connections were, as noted, more transactional. Hence, instead of being a collective effort by multiple actors, the orchestration phase was primarily driven by the focal firm.

Thus, we argue that local identification played a role here, as it induced a sense of responsibility, leading actors in village resorts to become comparatively more committed to contributing and supporting the transformation without the need for extensive relationship-building efforts. Rowley et al. (2000) argue that sharing resources can lead to closer relationships, however, these findings extend this by showing that high-quality ties can yield stronger commitment to transformative change. Furthermore, these findings suggest that adding this emotional connection to a place, beyond only physical proximity, enhances both bond strength (Smith & Stevens, 2010) but also makes actors more inclined to drive meaningful change. Consequently, empirical findings indicate that strong local identification can enhance commitment and the collective transformative power to drive change in networks.

Interest alignment. Furthermore, the level of interest alignment amongst actors in the resorts differed during orchestration. This made *goal-articulation*, *communicating* and *organising* activities different. In village resorts, the destination company had created sustainability goals for the member organisations. However, apart from these explicit targets, actors in the network seemed to share implicit interests of wanting to contribute to the resort's long-term health. This was evident through the use of the same type of personal language and in answers highlighting their willingness to prioritise the collective good over personal gains. Interviewees had not been explicitly told to prioritise this way, it was rather understood as a shared sentiment. Thus, many of the *joint goals* for the transformation were implicitly formed. This supports Rowley et al. (2000) that relationally embedded networks can support better shared understanding. Moreover, the ecosystem largely coordinated itself, guided by aligned interest together with shared practices that were established prior to the study period. Lastly, the extensive resource-sharing (e.g., in

employees and infrastructure) naturally fostered alignment of interest, as they depended on each other's resources. Going against the interest of someone else, would also harm their own. Altogether, the orchestration was carried out in a rather informal manner, rooted in norms, trust, and shared interest.

In contrast, the integrated resort was characterised by less interest alignment, as coordinating with the municipality was described as demanding. This can be explained by a lack of resource-sharing and less dependence on each other, which can limit shared interest (Rowley et al., 2000). The integrated resort thus engaged in more explicit ways of *forming joint goals*. For instance, by steering documents and laws regulating expansion decisions, hence, indicating a more formal orchestration process. Consequently, empirical findings indicate that the degree of embeddedness can impact the level of aligned interests amongst actors and the necessity for explicit orchestration of transformations.

5.2.2.2 Stabilisation

Considering stabilisation, a strong theme emerged – *stabilisation need* – emphasising the varying need for active governance in stabilising the ecosystem. These findings provide valuable insights into the dynamics of mature ecosystems, showing that norms and routines usually associated with final phases of transformation (e.g., Kolagar et al., 2020), were present throughout the transformation process and developed organically. Thus, extending findings by Foss et al. (2023).

Stabilisation need. The empirical findings indicate that the resorts had established norms and practices already prior to the study period that permeated the transformation process. During the transformations, most of the norms and values stayed consistent, whilst common practices, ways of working and communicating evolved alongside alterations of actors BMs. As mentioned earlier, the established norms either leaned towards promoting collaboration and support, in the case of village resorts, or towards more individualistic and passive routines in the integrated resort.

As a result, the need for active governance by the focal firm was observed to be reduced in the village resorts. This can be explained by the fact that actors relied on a consensus of practices and routines that encouraged them to autonomously adapt, support and engage in *continuous improvements* (Granovetter, 2005). Conversely, the focal firms' independent way of working and actively initiating and leading changes in the integrated resort increased the need for active governance. Ecosystem actors were more passively waiting for directions or instructions. This can be explained by the fact that the focal firm conditioned them to work in such a manner, where this became the norm (Granovetter, 2005). This prompted the focal firm to undertake more formal efforts to stabilise the ecosystem, including directing actors and employees to focus on specific development projects.

These findings are interesting as they show how pre-existing strong norms in mature ecosystems can influence transformation processes in different ways depending on the kind of norms. The reduced significance of the focal firm in driving the transformation in village resorts contradicts scholars (e.g., Yi et al., 2022; Snihur et al., 2018) who emphasise the focal firm's importance in

managing all phases of transformation. Thus, raising interesting considerations of how effective governance and dynamics relating to the reinforcement of behaviours may differ between early and more mature ecosystems. The particular importance of a focal firm's ad hoc problem-solving skills in mature ecosystems could not be observed (Foss et al., 2023). However, we acknowledge the possibility that interviewees might have omitted sensitive information concerning issues and conflicts during the interviews. Altogether, the structural and relational positions of each resort either decreased, or increased, the need for the focal firms' involvement in stabilising transformative efforts. Table 10 summarises our findings from the ecosystem-level.

Table 10. *Overview of Resorts Orientations in Aspects (Ecosystem-level)*

Ecosystem-level Aspects	**Commitment**	**Interest Alignment**	**Stabilisation Need**
Village resorts			
Orientation	Higher	Higher	Lower
Exemplary Quote	*"When times have been challenging, there's been a collective drive motivating people to step out of their homes and unite for the betterment of the community."* – X1	*"We're already aligned in our thinking, so it was and is rather easy to come together, as we're often on the same track."* – Y5	*"Businesses stay open year-round, getting better at what they do and attracting more businesses to establish. It's just how things have naturally evolved, making everyone more professional without anyone needing to tell them to."* – X1
Emphasised by	X1, X5, Y2	X2, X3, Y1, Y2, Y5	X1, X5, Y2
Integrated resort			
Orientation	Lower	Lower	Higher
Exemplary Quote	*"Our CEO is skilled at setting directives [...] So, it's like they handle their responsibilities, and I handle mine."* – Z5	*"Previously, ski lifts could be built almost anywhere, but now stricter requirements and municipal approval are needed[...]. Requests that used to take a week to process now require more time, up to 1.5 years. Making coordination somewhat more difficult."* – Z1	*"Usually, the management takes the lead in initiating and will likely continue to do so in most development initiatives.[...]"* – Z5
Emphasised by	Z1, Z3, Z5	Z1, Z3, Z7	Z2, Z4, Z5

Orientations are indicated in comparison to the other resort type and should not be viewed independently or in absolute terms.

5.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to increase the understanding of how mature ecosystem transformation is influenced by its context wherein a focal firm sets the innovation agenda and coordinates the ecosystem activities. Therefore, the following research question was formulated:

How are contextual factors influencing ski resorts when transforming their ecosystems?

The findings indicate that contextual factors can have a profound influence on how ski resorts transform. The answer comprises two parts. Firstly, it involves enhancing the understanding of the contexts within ski resorts by examining the factors that influence the transformation process. Secondly, it entails outlining the distinct approaches that emerge as a result of these varying contexts.

Firstly, in terms of structural factors, density and centrality amongst the local actors played a significant role. Influences from holes and equivalents were not observed. Additionally, the ski operators' relationship to the industry association was identified to facilitate training and knowledge-sharing that supported their work. We conceptualise the industry association as an *intermediary,* and argue that it constitutes a factor that can contribute to a firm's structural embeddedness. Considering the relational factors, the strengths of the connections with others in the ski resort were found influential. Interestingly, findings indicate that not only spending time with each other contributes to strong relations, but also individuals' level of identification with the same place, community and lifestyle. We refer to this as *local identification*, and argue that it can enhance a firm's relational embeddedness as well as largely influence how a ski operator chooses to transform the ski resort.

Secondly, looking into the transformation process, two different approaches were observed, each corresponding to distinct contexts. In simple terms, village resorts underwent a transformation, developing into year-round destinations, whereas the integrated resort enhanced their winter offering by leveraging technology and expanding slopes. More specifically, findings indicate that different positions in regards to the above described structural and relational factors influenced ski operators to opt for entirely divergent approaches to achieve transformation. The following aspects within the two approaches were identified during the exploration phase: (1) *breadth*, (2) *incentives*, (3) *temporal orientation*, and (4) *scope of innovation*; as well as the following in the orchestration phase: (5) *commitment* and (6) *interest alignment*; and lastly, in the third phase (7) *stabilisation need.*

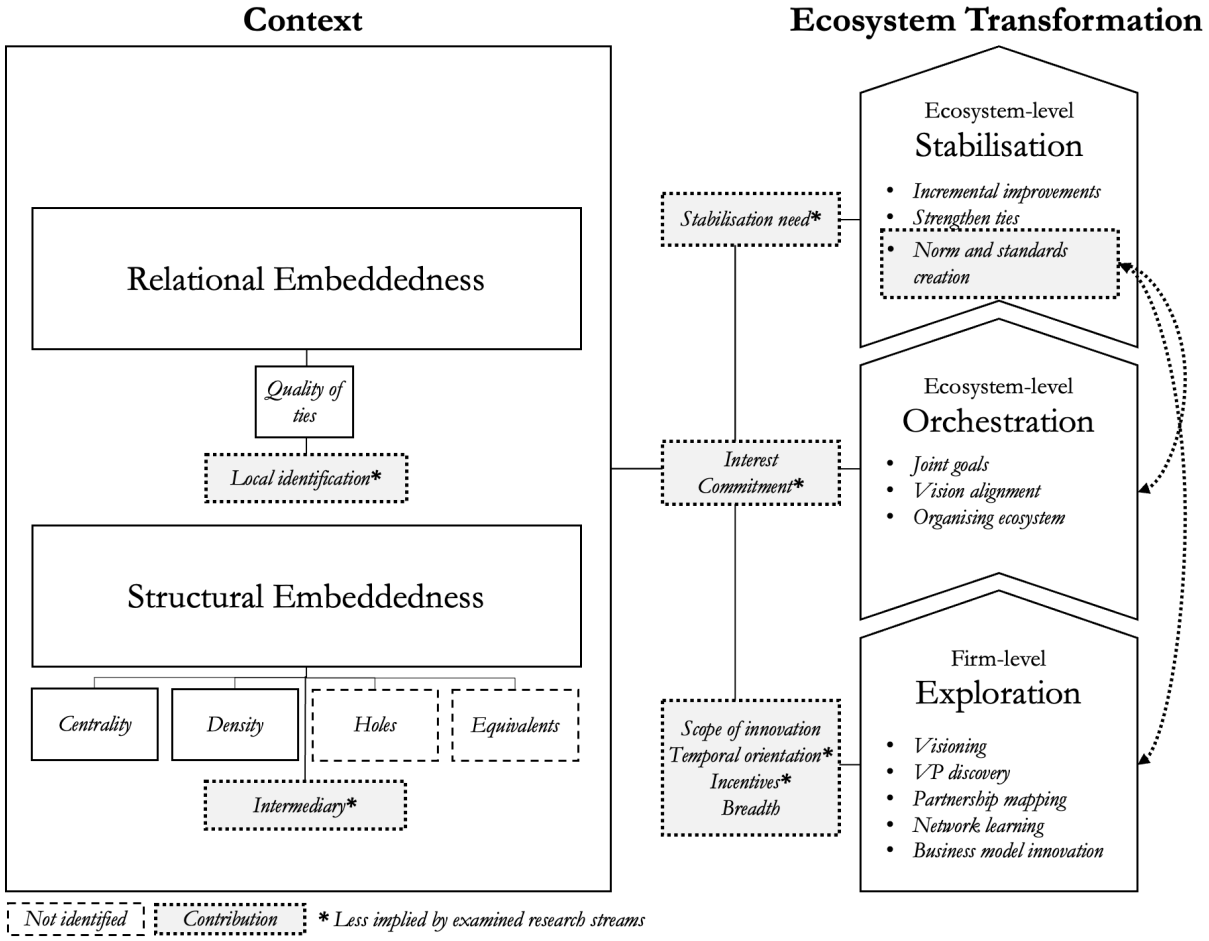
Our findings indicate that village resorts, which were characterised by strong social connections strengthened by local identification, demonstrated the following approach. During the exploration phase, the approach entailed: (1) considering a wider range of perspectives, (2) placing greater emphasis on non-economic incentives, (3) adopting an intergenerational perspective to transformation, and (4) embracing substantial changes to their BMs. Furthermore, during the orchestration phase, actors within the village resorts exhibited (5) higher levels of commitment to drive transformative change and (6) shared implicitly aligned interests to a

greater extent. Additionally, they pursued stabilisation in a (7) more autonomous fashion, with active participation and reinforcement from all ecosystem actors. In contrast, the integrated resort, characterised by limited structural and relational embeddedness, and a lack of local identification, adopted a contrasting approach in all identified aspects. The ski operator (1) narrowed its exploration to a specific group, (2) exhibited a stronger emphasis on economic incentives, (3) prioritised the present, and (4) implemented incremental changes to their core. Moreover, (5) lower levels of commitment were observed, with the ski operator (6) explicitly aligning interests through agreements and (7) undertaking active efforts to stabilise.

Having outlined the influence of contextual factors, our focus now shifts to conclude on the dynamics of mature ecosystems. The findings reveal that transformations in mature ecosystems share certain similarities with less mature ecosystems, however, with one significant distinction. Norms and practices were established prior to the initiation of the transformation and permeated all three phases, rather than being limited to the stabilisation phase, as previous literature suggests. These norms guided actors to follow practices, routines, and established norms. Consequently, the findings highlight the importance of recognising that transformation in mature ecosystems does not begin from a clean slate. Instead, it is essential for the focal firm to acknowledge the existing values and norms within the ecosystem and align their activities in the exploration, orchestration, and stabilisation phases accordingly. Findings indicate that this adaptive approach is crucial for the focal firm to effectively manage change in mature ecosystems, as deviating from strong norms may lead the focal firm to be sanctioned by other actors. Thus, potentially losing its reputation and effective role in governing the ecosystem. In village resorts, established norms led actors to autonomously engage in resort development, whereas it led actors in the integrated resort to adopt more of a wait-and-see approach. Both of these patterns were present throughout the transformation process, which demonstrate how norms consequently influenced all three phases.

An updated theoretical framework integrating the empirical findings is presented in figure 6, showing how the context influences the ecosystem transformation processes in ski resorts.

Figure 6. *Updated Theoretical Framework*



To conclude, our findings show that contextual factors can have a profound influence on how ski resorts transform. In particular, the findings marked with (*) are interesting, as they are not as prominent in the examined literature streams, and therefore offer novel valuable insights into the identified research gaps. Of particular importance is the presence of a strong local identification that was observed to enhance commitment amongst all actors in the ski resort, fostering a collective power to drive transformative change. These insights have significant implications as they leave practitioners and scholars with an intriguing dilemma – the promise of greater ability to pursue radical transformation, but no guarantee that it remains economically viable in the longer term.

6. Discussion

This study concludes by presenting our (6.1) theoretical contributions and (6.2) managerial implications, followed by outlining (6.3) limitations of the study and (6.4) suggestions for future research.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study brings new knowledge into the existing ecosystem literature by extending with two different yet interrelated literature streams – BMI and embeddedness theory. By doing so, we contribute to the identified research gaps in several ways.

To begin with, our study contributes to current literature (e.g., Foss et al., 2023) by synthesising characteristics of mature ecosystems and enhancing knowledge on specific dynamics within them. The findings highlight how strongly rooted norms to a larger extent reinforce behaviours amongst actors in mature ecosystems, which consequently needs to be taken into account when managing transformation processes. As such, we provide scholars with an improved understanding of the dynamics, particularly relating to the focal firm, in mature ecosystems. Thus, logically extending insights regarding the full lifecycle of ecosystems.

Moreover, our study identifies seven distinct aspects of the ecosystem transformation process and establishes their relationship with the focal firm's network position. Whilst three of these were implied by previous research, four were less salient. Consequently, we significantly nuance understanding by elaborating on these four which include a focal firm's: incentives, temporal orientation, commitment, and stabilisation need. Temporal orientation is particularly interesting as it adds a new dimension which is the time perspective on network embeddedness, BMI, and ecosystem transformation.

Finally, our contributions extend beyond the initial expectation of enhancing knowledge on the influences stemming from a firm's context. This, as we also contribute with further nuance to the theoretical concept of network embeddedness itself. Specifically, our study provides two additional factors, which we conceptualise as *intermediary* and *local identification*. These were observed to significantly influence the transformation process and contribute to a firm's embeddedness in its network. The sense of local identification influencing actors to transform is particularly interesting, as previous scholars suggest that innovations largely come from distant ties providing novel information (Granovetter, 2005). Thus, leaving scholars with a consideration whether innovation and transformation is more dependent on valuable information, commitment, or perhaps both. Lastly, uncovering these new layers of interpretation regarding a firm's structural and relational position enhances scholars' understanding of firm actions, ultimately, extending conceptual tools for analysing ecosystem transformation processes.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Despite being subject to further validation given the exploratory nature of this study, our findings show valuable managerial implications.

Firstly, our findings emphasise the importance of ski resorts to consider their context. By understanding their structural and relational position, including access to intermediaries and presence of local identification, ski resorts can improve their ability to identify synergies and navigate transformations more effectively. This is particularly relevant now as many ski resorts find themselves at a pivotal moment, considering whether to transform their winter offerings into year-round destinations.

Secondly, our findings, as noted, introduce an intriguing dilemma. On the one hand, cultivating strong connections were found to facilitate commitment to transform. Therefore, practitioners seeking to drive radical transformation should prioritise relationship-building, where fostering a connection to a specific place, community, or lifestyle, may serve as a powerful tool to unite employees. Local identification may not be limited to villages; it can also extend to the office site, or a strong company culture (i.e. lifestyle) potentially fostering similar mechanisms. On the other hand, although our findings indicate that strong social connections can stimulate innovation, the relationship to financial performance is not explored in this study. Therefore, building upon Mathias et al (2021), we issue a cautionary note. Overly strong local identification could potentially lead to overcommitment, with excessively ambitious innovation agendas, with no guarantee of improved financial performance. Hence, our findings urge practitioners to acknowledge these identified threats and opportunities.

Thirdly, our study finds the role of intermediaries as vital in driving change. Therefore, we urge ski resorts to actively engage with these organisations, as well as the organisations to accelerate their valuable efforts. By increasing knowledge-sharing between ski resorts, organisations, and policy-makers, this study indicates that practitioners can increase their ability to make informed decisions, supporting the development of ski resorts, both locally and on a broader scale.

6.3 Study Limitations

Our study is subject to several limitations providing opportunities for further research. Firstly, given the time and resource constraints, we relied on interviewees accounts of previous events. This is subject to criticism, as interviewees may have selective or distorted recollection of the reality, as the study extended over a long period of time. To mitigate this effect, we employed triangulation methods and ensured that individuals who had been employed at the organisation throughout the entire study period were included in the interviewee sample. In line with this, we adopted an interpretivist approach to this study and so the findings may be shaped based on our view of reality. Secondly, our comparative case study enabled in-depth knowledge of the examined ski resorts, and in particular privately-owned resorts in Sweden. Whilst providing in-depth understanding, this also limits the generalisability of the study as there may be characteristics which are unique to the cases and/or industry. Lastly, this study delimited

contextual factors to network-related constructs. Thus, leaving room for further exploration of other types of contextual factors such as institutional and competitive pressures.

6.4 Future Research

Building on the limitations, this study opens up numerous avenues for future research. To begin with, we urge scholars to take on longitudinal studies as well as carry out similar comparative case studies in other types of contexts. This would further increase the credibility as well as test the generalisability of our findings.

Moreover, our findings inspire further research opportunities. Firstly, we extend calls from previous scholars to take on research into further examining dynamics related to innovation and transformation in mature ecosystems. Secondly, further research is needed into how contextual factors influence ecosystem transformation, where the identified additional factors – intermediaries and local identification – offer promising opportunities. Although we provide valuable insights, there is still much to explore. For instance, mapping relationships between the identified factors and the structural and relational factors of network embeddedness would further enhance theoretical interpretation. Moreover, we urge scholars to specifically examine the influence of local identification on the transformation process. Together, these avenues hold great potential to enhance understanding of ecosystem transformation processes.

We acknowledge that there are parallel streams that can help in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of our findings when embarking on these research opportunities. For instance, Watkins et al. (2015) and Knudsen (2007) examine the role of industry associations in innovation and knowledge diffusion. Moreover, the mechanisms of local identification resonate with research discussing spatiality, which encompasses how physical spaces influence and shape human behaviour (Coenen et al., 2012). Thus, we encourage scholars to build on the collective knowledge from these parallel streams together with our study to further generate insights into the proposed avenues.

Ultimately, our findings and research avenues aim to provide scholars and practitioners with valuable insights and tools to more effectively navigate transformation processes, and increase the likelihood of not jeopardising firms' economic viability when engaging in transformative change.

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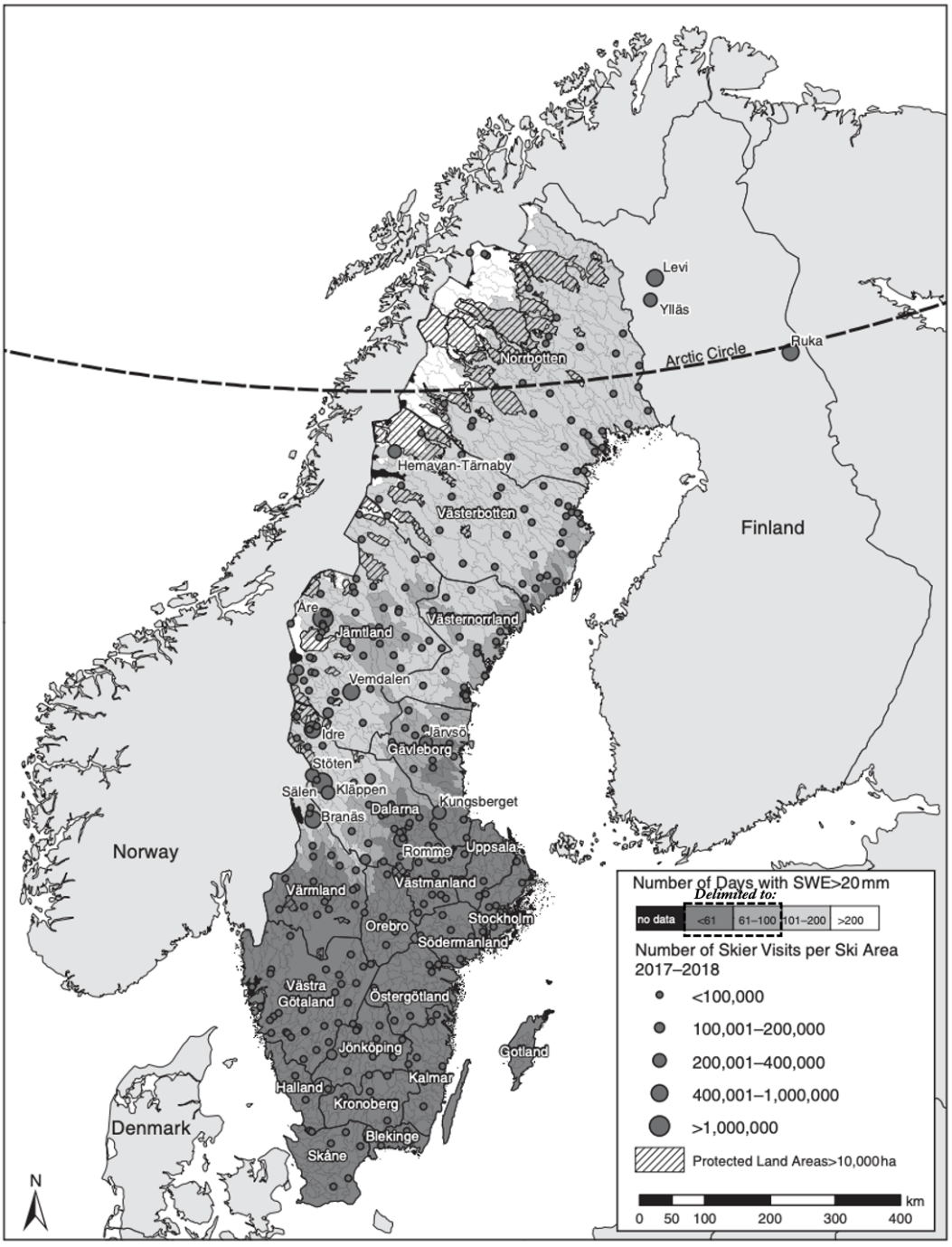
8. Appendix

8.1 Geographical Delimitation

Snow Reliability of Downhill Skiing Areas in Sweden 2021–2050F



Sources: Demiroglu et al. (2020) Data sources: SMHI (2015); SLAO (2018); Lantmäteriet (2019). Note that the figure is not our own work.

Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) refers to the amount of water contained within a given volume of snow, which is a metric for understanding snowpack conditions. "SWE > 20mm" indicates that the snowpack's water content is greater than 20 millimetres.

8.2 Overview of Previous Definitions of Business Ecosystems

Definition	Author
"Group[s] of interacting firms that depend on each other's activities[...]centres on a focal firm and its environment"	Daymond et al. (2023)
"A system in which companies coevolve capabilities around a new innovation: they work cooperatively and competitively to support new products, satisfy customer needs, and eventually incorporate the next round of innovations"	Cobben et al. (2022)
"The alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialise"	Adner (2017)
"A group of companies, which simultaneously create value by combining their skills and assets"	Clarysse et al. (2014)
"Community of organisations, institutions, and individuals that impact the enterprise and the enterprise's customers and supplies"	Teece (2007)
"The economic community of organisations that share a set of interrelated roles, dependencies, and relationships.	Iansiti & Levien (2004)
"An economic community supported by a foundation of interacting organisations and individuals – the organisms of the business world. The economic community produces goods and services of value to customers, who are themselves members of the ecosystem. The member organisms also include suppliers, lead producers, competitors, and other stakeholders. Over time, they coevolve their capabilities and roles, and tend to align themselves with the directions set by one or more central companies. Those companies holding leadership roles may change over time, but the function of ecosystem leader is valued by the community because it enables members to move toward shared visions to align their investments, and to find mutually supportive roles."	Moore (1996)

8.3 Overview of Transformation Phases

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Oghazi et al. (2022)				
	Transformational forces	Opportunity identification	Value alignment	Revitalisation
Activities	· Rapid technology developments · Customer behaviour changes	· Strategic change push factors · Technology insight pull factors	· Creators' involvement · Providers' acceptance · Users' readiness	· Capability enhancing · Capability destroying
Kolgar et al. (2022)				
	Formation	Orchestration	Expansion	

Activities	· Initiating ecosystem vision · Mapping appropriate partnerships · Incentivising joint engagement for ecosystem	· Defining governance principles · Ecosystem role distribution · Ensuring actors' value creation and capture alignment	· Continuous ecosystem evolution and adaptation · Revitalising ecosystem collaboration · Strengthening the ecosystem bonds

Möller et al. (2020)

	Exploration	Mobilisation	Stabilisation
Activities	· Visioning and sense-making · Development agenda forming · Collaborative/network learning · Exploring - prototyping · Sensegiving and agenda promotion · Feasibility ensuring	· Innovation network forming · Joint goals and intention forming · Strategic network organising · Ecosystem construction	· Business extension incremental improvements · Ecosystem consolidating · Institutionalising

Moore (1993)

	Birth	Expansion	Leadership	Self-renewal
Activities	· Bet on a seed innovation that can lead to revolutionary product · Discover the right customer VP · Design a business that can serve the potential market	· Compete against other ecosystems to control strategic markets · Stimulate demand for your product or service offerings · Meet demand with adequate supply	· Guide the ecosystem's investment directions and technical standards · Make sure the ecosystem has a robust community of suppliers · Maintain bargaining power by controlling key elements of value	· Not specified

8.4 Overview of Interviewees

Interviewee	Organisation	Role	Date	Duration
Pre-Study				
PS1	Norwegian Ski Resort	CEO	23.01.2023	36 min
PS2	N/A	Professional Ski Athlete	22.01.2023	32 min
PS3	University	Professor in Climate Change and Sustainability	31.01.2023	32 min
PS4	Swedish Ski Resort	Head of Sustainability	07.02.2023	28 min
PS5	Swiss Ski Operator	CEO	09.02.2023	20 min
In-depth Interviews				
Case X				
X1	Destination Company	Destination Developer	08.03.2023	66 min
X2	Ski Operator	CEO	08.03.2023	65 min
X3	Ski Operator	Operations Manager	10.03.2023	57 min
X4	Destination Company	Project Manager	13.03.2023	52 min
X5	Local Business Owner	CEO	16.03.2023	68 min
X6	Municipality	Establishment Coordinator	25.04.2023	36 min
Case Y				
Y1	Ski Operator	Head of Sports and HR	15.03.2023	56 min
Y2	Ski Operator	CEO	17.03.2023	59 min
Y3	Ski Operator	Head of Marketing and Communication	21.03.2023	62 min
Y4	Non-profit Organisation	Operations Coordinator	17.04.2023	48 min
Y5	Ski Operator	Store Manager	24.04.2023	44 min
Y6	Municipality	Business Developer	25.04.2023	34 min
Y7	Destination	CEO	25.04.2023	32 min

	Company			
Case Z				
Z1	Ski Operator	Technical Manager	08.03.2023	57 min
Z2	Ski Operator	HR Manager	09.03.2023	45 min
Z3	Ski Operator	Finance Manager	10.03.2023	49 min
Z4	Ski Operator	Site Manager	13.03.2023	52 min
Z5	Ski Operator	Site Manager	14.03.2023	52 min
Z6	Ski Operator	Head of Communication	15.03.2023	42 min
Z7	Municipality	Head of Construction & Environment	24.04.2023	33 min
Case XYZ				
XYZ1	Industry Association	CEO	13.03.2023	52 min

8.5 Interview Guide: Pre-Study

The interview guide was used as a basis for discussion and was adjusted according to the role of the interviewee.

Topic	**Question**
Background information	· How would you describe your role? · How long have you been working in the ski industry?
Ski resort structure	· How would you describe the structure of ski resorts? · What activities exist in a ski resort? · Who operates the various activities in the ski resort?

Current key issues	· What do you see as the current key issues in the ski resort industry?
	· Have you seen any impact from climate change on the ski resort industry?
	  ○ If yes, what have you seen?
	· Do you believe ski resorts see a need to innovate their business models?
	· Have you noticed any changes in ski resort business models in recent years?
	  ○ If so, what changes have you noticed?
	· Do you believe there are any ski resorts or regions which are particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate change?

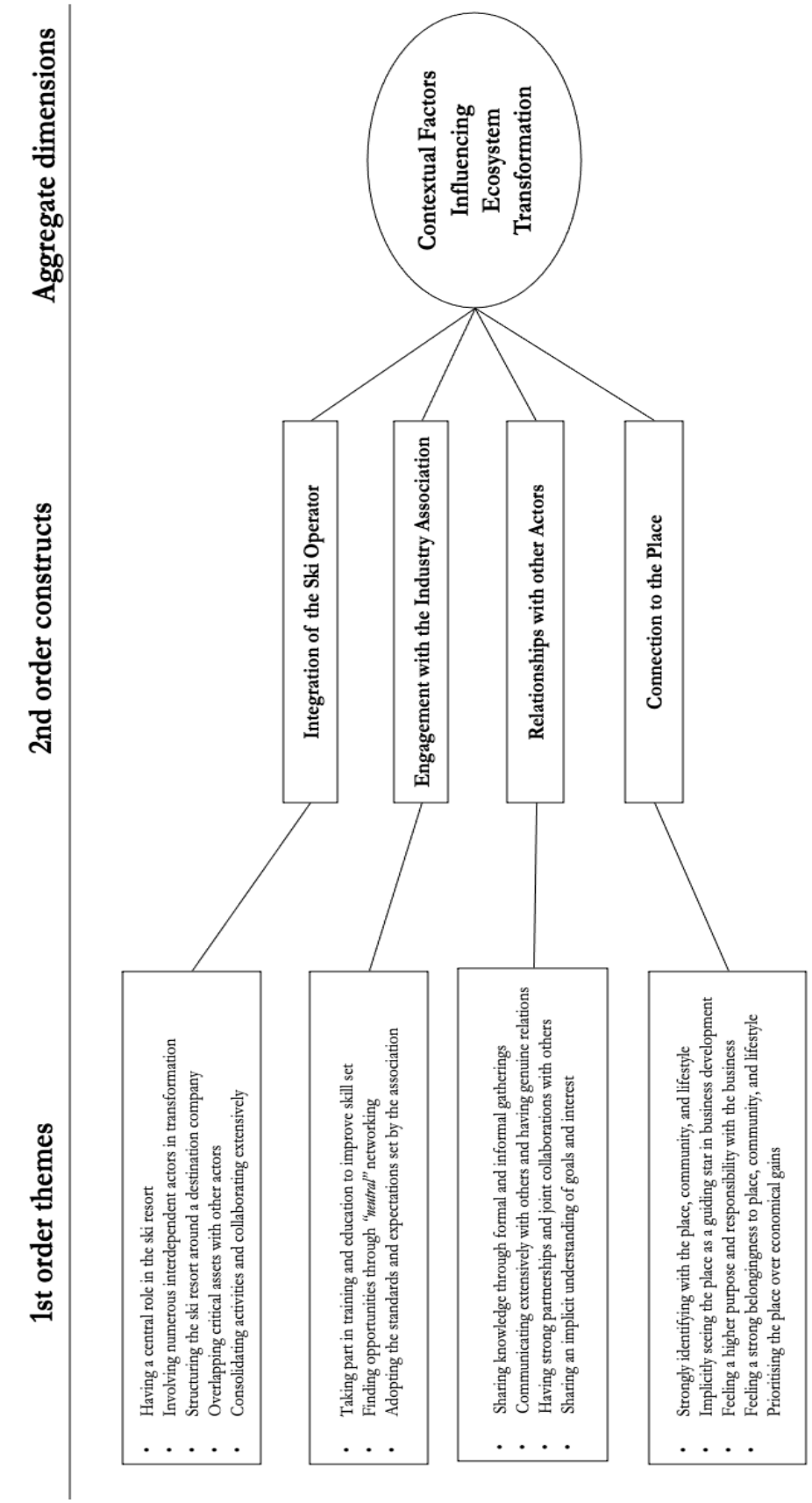
8.6 Interview Guide: In-depth Interviews

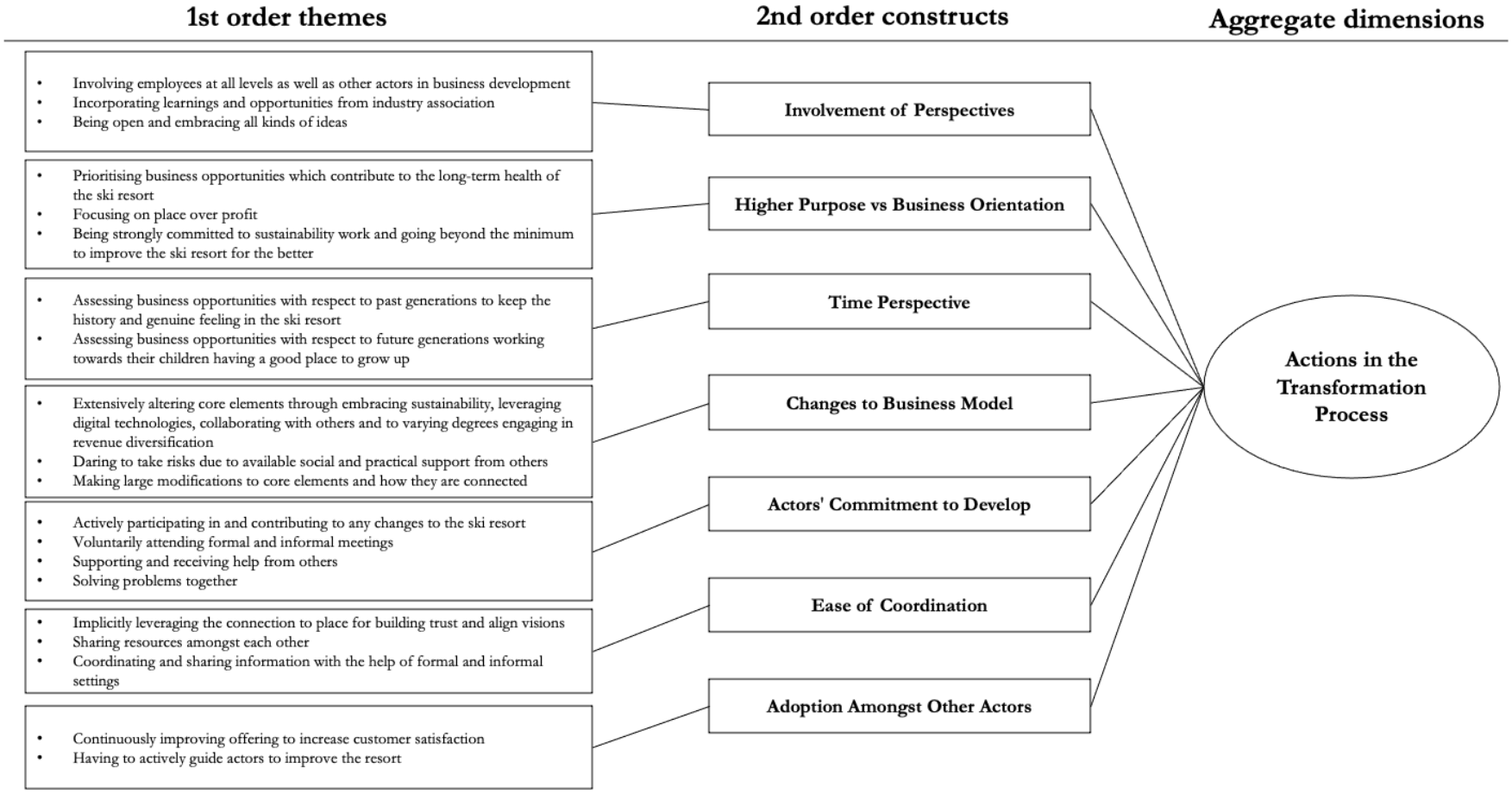
The interview guide was continuously adapted and updated, providing a basis from which further discussion arose. In addition, the interview guide was adjusted based on the role of the interviewee.

Topic	**Question**
Introduction	· Presentation of authors · Presentation of thesis and its general purpose · Presentation of formal information around participation: · Participation is voluntary · You have the right to cancel the interview at any time without explaining why · The company, interviewee name, and role will be anonymised · Ask for approval to record the interview to later transcribe it excluding any personal data · Any questions before we begin?
Background information	· How would you describe your role at the company? · How long have you worked at the company?
External pressures	· What role, if any, does climate change play for your business? · What parts, if any, of your business have you changed in light of climate change? ○ How?
Business Model Innovation	· How would you describe that your company's business model has changed in recent years? · In general, describe the motivations and reasons for why these changes have been made. · Can you specify a time period for the business model changes?

Ecosystem transformation & Embeddedness	· Who do you see as your key partners?
	· How would you describe your relationship with your key partners?
	  ○ What do you think has caused the relationships to be as they are now?
	  ○ How would you describe your role amongst the actors?
	· How do you identify opportunities to change your business model?
	· How do you coordinate with other actors when wanting to make changes?
	· Do you try to form joint goals between you and your stakeholders?
	  ○ If yes, how?
	· How do you communicate with other parties?
	· Do you have any processes for how to collaborate with others around you? If so, what are they?
	· Can you briefly describe if and how you make continuous improvements to your business model?
	· How do you drive through any changes of your business model?
	· How do you strengthen your relationship with other actors?

8.7 Data Structure




1st order themes
2nd order constructs
Aggregate dimensions
Involving employees at all levels as well as other actors in business development
Incorporating learnings and opportunities from industry association
Being open and embracing all kinds of ideas
Involvement of Perspectives
Prioritising business opportunities which contribute to the long-term health of the ski resort
Focusing on place over profit
Being strongly committed to sustainability work and going beyond the minimum to improve the ski resort for the better
Higher Purpose vs Business Orientation
Assessing business opportunities with respect to past generations to keep the history and genuine feeling in the ski resort
Assessing business opportunities with respect to future generations working towards their children having a good place to grow up
Time Perspective
Extensively altering core elements through embracing sustainability, leveraging digital technologies, collaborating with others and to varying degrees engaging in revenue diversification
Daring to take risks due to available social and practical support from others
Making large modifications to core elements and how they are connected
Changes to Business Model
Actively participating in and contributing to any changes to the ski resort
Voluntarily attending formal and informal meetings
Supporting and receiving help from others
Solving problems together
Actors' Commitment to Develop
Implicitly leveraging the connection to place for building trust and align visions
Sharing resources amongst each other
Coordinating and sharing information with the help of formal and informal settings
Ease of Coordination
Continuously improving offering to increase customer satisfaction
Having to actively guide actors to improve the resort
Adoption Amongst Other Actors
Actions in the Transformation Process