Strategic Value Dynamics in the Swedish Football Youth Academy Ecosystem

An Empirical Analysis

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Bachelor Thesis

Stockholm School of Economics

2026

Abstract

This thesis examines how value is created and appropriated within the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem. Drawing on Gueler and Schneider's (2021) integrated framework – combining the Resource-Based View and ecosystem theory – it analyses strategic value dynamics among clubs, agents, sponsors, and regulatory actors. A qualitative design was employed, incorporating semi-structured interviews and document-based observations. Findings show that value dynamics are driven less by unique training methodologies and more by the interplay between tangible resources and intangible assets such as trust, reputation, and community engagement. Competitive advantage emerges through alignment, interdependence, and the strategic orchestration of relationships, with regulatory frameworks both enabling and constraining stakeholder strategies. The study contributes to academia by providing one of the first empirical applications of a combined RBV–ecosystem lens in a youth football context, advancing understanding of multi-actor value dynamics in sports ecosystems.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences – your contributions were essential to the completion of this thesis. I am deeply thankful to my tutor Fredrik Lange, whose guidance served as a compass throughout this process, helping me stay on course.

Key words:

Strategic Value, Resource-Based View (RBV), Ecosystem Theory, Value Dynamics, Youth Academies

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1.Introduction

In modern football, youth academies are no longer perceived solely as the developmental arms of professional clubs. Instead, driven by an influx of capital and a significantly broadened strategic mandate, they have transformed into complex, value-generating ecosystems in their own right. While their core function remains the production of players for senior squads or the transfer market, youth development has increasingly become a primary driver of overall club revenue and strategic viability. This market shaping has subsequently attracted a diverse array of new, external actors – ranging from data analytics firms and specialized training providers to digital content creators and streaming platforms – who seek to contribute and appropriate value in novel ways (Segovia, 2023).

This dynamic is compellingly illustrated by IF Brommapojkarna, a mid-tier Swedish club operating one of the largest youth academies in Europe. With over 260 youth teams and approximately 4,300 players, the club exemplifies how youth development operates as a central strategic priority. These structural investments have yielded immense reputational and financial returns, producing internationally recognized players such as Viktor Gyökeres, Dejan Kulusevski, and Lucas Bergvall. Through mechanisms such as FIFA's solidarity payments, IF Brommapojkarna continues to benefit financially from the subsequent transfers of its academy graduates, some of which have commanded fees of up to €30 million (Henriques, 2025). Consequently, the Swedish youth football ecosystem emerges not only as a productive talent pipeline but as a highly competitive market. Despite its modest population, Sweden has quietly established itself as one of Europe's most efficient talent factories, with clubs such as Malmö FF, AIK, and Hammarby consistently producing elite players (Transfermarkt, 2025). As diverse stakeholders enter this space seeking to maximize their value appropriation, the Swedish youth football ecosystem presents an ideal, yet under-researched, empirical context for investigating modern value dynamics.

Despite decades of research into how organizations create and capture value, much of the strategic management literature has remained constrained by firm-centric analysis. The Resource-Based View (RBV), one of the most influential theories in this domain, argues that competitive advantage stems from the possession of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). While RBV provides analytical precision, recent applications in sports contexts (Anderson et al., 2011; Balliauw et al., 2021) acknowledge its narrow scope, echoing critiques that the theory struggles to capture the relational complexity of value creation in highly dynamic environments (Priem & Butler, 2001; Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010). Conversely, ecosystem theory (Moore, 1993; Adner, 2017) offers a holistic lens, framing markets as "alignment structures of multilateral partners" necessary for a joint value proposition to materialize. However, while ecosystem theory successfully maps structural interdependencies, it often remains conceptually abstract, lacking the granular evaluative tools required to measure how resources are actually exchanged, valued, or sustained in practice.

Thus, strategy scholars have historically examined the ecosystem research stream in isolation from resource-valuation theories, leaving a structural void in how to measure true value co-creation and competitive value appropriation. In response to this limitation, Gueler and Schneider (2021) proposed a synthesized, four-dimensional framework that evaluates strategic value through an actor's contribution to the value proposition, scarcity,

complementarity, and reputation. While this framework offers a robust theoretical bridge, it was originally operationalized as a quantitative, static, and unilateral measurement model. In a rapidly commercializing, relationship-driven environment like the Swedish youth football ecosystem, value is not a static asset possessed by a single firm, but a dynamic, multilateral negotiation.

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to adapt and apply Gueler and Schneider's (2021) integrated framework qualitatively to establish a foundational empirical understanding of this complex market. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following primary research question: *"How do foundational actors negotiate value contribution and value appropriation within the rapidly commercializing ecosystem of Swedish youth football academies?"* To systematically guide this inquiry, the study addresses two sub-questions. To answer these questions, this study adopts a qualitative research design guided by Patton's (2015) principles for qualitative inquiry. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with clubs, agents, and sponsors, supplemented by triangulated observations of regulatory frameworks from key governing bodies.

By conducting this investigation, this thesis provides three key contributions to the strategic management literature. First, it tests the contextual boundaries of the RBV-Ecosystem framework by applying it to a human-capital-centric sports market rather than a traditional technology industry. Second, it operationalizes a multilateral approach to power mapping, overcoming the focal-firm bias prevalent in prior studies. Finally, it drives an ontological shift in how resource value is conceptualized, utilizing analytical memos to empirically demonstrate that in non-hierarchical ecosystems, resources possess multidimensional, multiplicative value that a unilateral quantitative static self-assessment fails to capture.

2. Literature Review

The question of how organizations create and capture value is foundational to strategic management, the primary field this research aims to advance. In complex and interdependent environments such as the Swedish youth football ecosystem, this question becomes even more critical. While the concept of strategic value creation varies across theoretical traditions, it is often linked to how organizations build and maintain advantage through their unique resources and relationships. Wernerfelt (1984) defines resources as “anything which could be thought of as a strength or weakness of a given firm,” highlighting their role in creating value when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. From a different perspective, Moore (1993) suggests that firms must “co-evolve capabilities around a new innovation,” implying that value creation emerges not only from internal resources but also from aligning and collaborating with other actors. Accordingly, recent research has focused on identifying the strategic mechanisms that enhance an organization’s ability to create, sustain, and appropriate value in increasingly complex environments. (Ferreira et al, 2025)

2.1 Firm-centric strategic value creation: The Resource Based View

Prior to the widespread acceptance of the Resource Based View Theory (RBV Theory), a dominant paradigm in strategic management was influenced by economic tools and theories that solely focused on strategic analysis from external industry structures to create value. (Wernerfelt, 1984) By putting a lot of emphasis on industry environment, the perception was that competitive advantage comes from occupying a favorable position within a given industry structure based on a firm's product offerings. This view was exemplified by frameworks such as Porter’s Five Forces (Porter, 1979), which emphasized industry conditions and competitive positioning as the main sources of advantage. Rooted in the Structure-Conduct-Performance paradigm (Bain, 1956; Scherer, 1980), this school of thought argued that firms succeed by occupying favorable positions within their industry, typically through product-market strategies that exploit structural characteristics like barriers to entry or supplier power.

This industry-based view focused on where to compete and how to position products in the market. However, Wernerfelt (1984) argues that firms should implement a more resource-based view when conducting strategic analysis to create value. The idea of looking at a firm's internal strengths and weaknesses wasn't entirely new in strategic management. The famous Harvard Business Policy framework, which Andrews (1971, p.19) formalized, indeed emphasized the importance of analyzing a firm's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) whereas "strengths and weaknesses" are inherently internal, resource-based considerations. While prior strategic management discussions might touch upon internal resources, the rigorous economic models and analytical tools available at the time were predominantly focused on external industry structures, causing a gap of formal economic tools for rigorously analyzing a firm's resource position. By planting the seeds for RBV Theory, Wernerfelt (1984) attempts to fill this gap by providing the concepts of resource position barriers, resource-product matrix and how to think about resource accumulation over time. Wernerfelt (1984) is therefore not criticizing the predominant paradigm, but rather making a case where he is elevating the resource side to act as a crucial complement to the existing industry-based analyses. Barney (1991) further

formalizes the Resource-Based View by introducing the well-known VRIN framework – highlighting that resources must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable to generate sustained competitive advantage. This framework laid the foundation for an extensive and evolving body of research that has since diversified across disciplines, integrated with complementary theories, and explored a wide range of strategic phenomena – from firm performance and dynamic capabilities to entrepreneurial orientation, information technology, and strategic alliances. (Ferreira et al, 2025)

These strategic dynamics are also evident in the field of sport, where organizations increasingly seek to leverage unique resources to gain long-term advantage in highly competitive environments. Recent studies have applied RBV directly to football systems, including youth player development. For example, Anderson et al. (2011) use RBV to analyze the sustained success of a basketball youth academy, identifying the key resource that enabled Gonzaga – a mid-major university – to consistently achieve national prominence in NCAA Division I men's basketball. The study argues that Gonzaga's continued success was not a matter of chance, but the result of effective strategic management and the leveraging of a unique, difficult-to-replicate resource.

However, Chelladurai et al. (2016) note that "*while these studies [including Anderson and Birrer] represent pioneering efforts in employing the resource-based view in investigating competitive advantage in professional sports and collegiate athletics, they are rather narrow in their scope,*" implying that a focus on one or two key resources may oversimplify a more complex reality. This critique supports Carmeli et al.'s (2009) argument that "competitive position is derived from a combination of several resources and capabilities," suggesting that strategic value often stems from a broader configuration of resources rather than a single core asset.

Furthermore, Balliauw et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study by using a composite variable that encompassed several facets and came to the conclusion that investments in youth academy quality significantly increase a player's market value. Their findings illustrate how academy infrastructure can function as a strategic value environment, where long-term investment contributes to sustained value creation – beyond short-term performance gains. Similar to the critiques of Anderson et al. (2011) however, Balliauw et al. also acknowledge that "*having more data, as well as additional variables…would allow further research with a broader scope than possible in this paper.*", suggesting that even a multifaceted approach may be insufficient to fully capture the complexity of player valuations, thereby raising questions about whether these long-term investments truly lead to sustained value creation.

The Resource-Based View has proven to be a powerful framework for understanding how organizations build and sustain competitive advantage through internal resources and capabilities. Its emphasis on resource heterogeneity, immobility, and the firm's internal capacity to deploy those resources effectively has shaped decades of research and practice across diverse sectors, including sport. However, consistent with critiques by Priem and Butler (2001) and Kraaijenbrink et al. (2010) and recent applications in youth sport contexts suggest that RBV can face limitations when trying to determine what actually constitutes a valuable resource. These limitations often stem from the theory's narrow analytical focus, which may overlook the dynamic and interconnected factors that influence value in more complex environments. These observations do not undermine the utility of RBV, but rather

highlight the need for complementary perspectives that account for broader systematic and relational dimensions of strategic value creation.

2.2 Co-created strategic value creation: The Ecosystem Theory

To fully grasp the theoretical origins of ecosystem theory, it is necessary to first examine a broader epistemological shift that occurred across the entire business administration discipline during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For decades, the dominant paradigm in business research was rooted in reductionism – the premise that a complex organization or market could be understood and optimized by isolating and breaking down its constituent parts. However, as business environments became increasingly specialized, globalized, and interconnected, scholars across multiple subfields began transitioning toward more holistic philosophies. This systems-based approach emphasized synthesis, arguing that value creation and competitive advantage are emergent properties resulting from the continuous interaction of parts forming a larger whole.

This departure from reductionist logic manifested simultaneously across core business disciplines, driven by the shared recognition that analyzing isolated organizational components was increasingly insufficient. Foundational work by Ackoff (1971) within management science formalized this perspective, arguing that an organization must be understood as an integrated, purposeful system where total performance depends on the interrelationships of its parts rather than the isolated optimization of individual elements. In market-facing disciplines, the conceptualization of markets and firm boundaries began to blur. In marketing, the focus shifted from discrete, transactional exchanges of tangible goods to a Service-Dominant logic, positing that value is not manufactured in isolation but dynamically co-created through continuous relationships within broader service networks (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This foundational perspective subsequently set the stage for modern marketing literature on market systems and market shaping, which examines how actors – rather than just operating within existing boundaries – actively configure new market structures, relationships, and resource logics (Vargo & Lusch, 2017; Nenonen et al., 2019). Similarly, supply chain literature challenged the traditional metaphor of a linear sequence, reframing operations as complex, multi-actor "networks" that demand holistic integration rather than siloed optimization (Lambert & Cooper, 2000). This holistic transition also reshaped intra-organizational disciplines. Scholars in human resources and performance management demonstrated that sustainable advantage and accurate performance evaluation stem not from fragmented policies or lagging financial metrics, but from synergistic "bundles" of practices (MacDuffie, 1995) and deeply interdependent organizational variables (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). Collectively, while these prominent works represent only a fraction of a much broader interdisciplinary literature, they establish a clear foundational consensus: modern value creation is fundamentally a systemic, multi-actor phenomenon.

While these interdisciplinary advancements underscore a universal shift toward systems thinking, this thesis is firmly anchored in strategic management. Consequently, it will focus specifically on how these multi-actor interdependencies have been conceptualized and operationalized within strategy literature. Within strategic management, the transition toward systems thinking required a departure from traditional, firm-centric industry analysis to capture the multi-actor nature of modern competition. Only a few years after Wernerfelts

(1984) paper on RBV theory, Moore (1993) released his paper on a new term called "business ecosystems". Inspired by biological ecosystems, Moore (1993) planted the seeds of ecosystem theory by arguing that "*a business is not just a member of a single industry but is part of a larger commercial ecology*". He contends that focusing solely on industry-specific competition is insufficient because companies often co-evolve and compete across traditional industry boundaries. Just like species in biological ecosystems evolve in response to and in conjunction with each other, stakeholders within a business ecosystem "*co-evolve capabilities around a new innovation"* (Moore, 1993) – meaning that a company's success is not solely dependent on its internal strengths, but also on the health and development of its partners and ecosystem as a whole. This new means of describing the competitive landscape of firms has increasingly attracted attention from practitioners. Teece (2016) declares that "the concept of ecosystems might now substitute for the industry for performing analysis". However, Moore's concept of business ecosystems, while groundbreaking, was primarily metaphorical in nature. It offered a compelling analogy but lacked detailed mechanisms for how firms manage and navigate such ecosystems in practice. This conceptual foundation set the stage for a subsequent stream of research focused on defining what ecosystems are, how they function, and under what conditions they emerge – ultimately aiming to translate the theory into more operational terms. (Jacobides et al, 2018)

Building on Moore's early formulation, some scholars switched their attention from merely recognizing co-evolution in business ecosystems to understanding the firm-level capabilities needed to manage it. Van den Bosch and Volberda (1999) introduced "coevolutionary capabilities," emphasizing the ongoing adaptation of internal competencies to external environmental changes. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) further clarified "dynamic capabilities" as the simple, experiential rules firms use to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources for continuous adaptation in fast-changing markets, thereby detailing how firms practically achieve this co-evolutionary dance. As the ecosystem literature matured, other scholars shifted attention from capabilities to understanding how firms strategically position themselves within complex interdependent networks. Iansiti and Levien (2004) introduced the "keystone" concept, highlighting how certain firms can orchestrate and enhance the health of an entire ecosystem for mutual benefit. Adner (2006) then narrowed the focus to "innovation ecosystems," emphasizing the critical need for firms to manage external interdependencies and align partners for the successful commercialization of their innovations. These two literature streams highlight attempts to advance understanding significantly in their respective areas, implicitly treating the ecosystem itself as a given, or as something understood through its effects on a firm's capabilities or strategy. They explained parts of the phenomenon – the firm's internal response, or its external strategic moves – but the holistic, fundamental definition and theoretical architecture of the ecosystem as a distinct system was indeed still abstract or fragmented. (Jacobides et al, 2018) In response to this fragmentation, a subsequent literature stream emerged that represents a crucial effort to bring greater conceptual rigor and clarity to the ecosystem construct itself. Adner (2017) provided a more precise definition, framing ecosystems as *"alignment structures of multilateral partners necessary for a focal value proposition to materialize"*, thereby distinguishing them from other organizational forms. Building on this foundation, Jacobides et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive synthesis and proposed a unifying theory of ecosystems grounded in dimensions such as orchestration, role structure, and multilateralism – establishing a common theoretical baseline and research agenda for the field's continued development.

Moore (1993) not only introduced the concept of business ecosystems using the technology industry as an illustrative case, but the theory has since remained largely concentrated within technology-intensive industries where innovation and digital interdependencies are central to firms' business models (Ratten et al., 2020). As the sports industry undergoes increasing digital transformation (Segovia et al., 2023), scholarly attention toward ecosystem perspectives in sport has grown. However, despite the broader presence of technology in sport, the application of ecosystem theory remains limited (Ratten et al., 2020), particularly within youth academy contexts – a gap further emphasized by Correia (2025).

In an effort to address this, Correia (2025) explored how the innovation ecosystem concept translates into the sports domain. Through case studies across multiple sports, the author proposed a definition of a sport innovation ecosystem that underscores interorganizational relationships and structural interdependence. However, while Correia successfully maps the theoretical existence of these networks, her classification lacks the analytical precision necessary to evaluate how value is actually exchanged or sustained. Because the research primarily highlights structural ambiguities in sport – such as the lack of clearly defined keystone roles or aligned stakeholder objectives – it falls short of operationalizing the mechanisms of these interactions. Recognizing this limitation, Correia explicitly calls for more granular research to systematically examine value co-creation strategies and to explore how complex multilateral interdependencies function beyond simple bilateral relationships.

Similarly, Segovia (2023) sought to apply the ecosystem perspective within a professional sports context by examining how stakeholders shape the strategic business model of a professional basketball club. However, the study was likewise characterized by a critical lack of analytical precision, a limitation further exacerbated by its methodological constraints. By employing a single case study and relying almost entirely on data collected from the focal organization's internal perspective, Segovia's research inherently restricts its capacity to measure true ecosystem dynamics. As Segovia acknowledges, relying on a single focal actor limits the opportunity to contrast observations across the broader network. Consequently, this unilateral lens prevents a deep exploration of stakeholder interdependencies, mutual value co-creation, and competitive value appropriation.

As demonstrated by the limitations in recent sports management research, a critical theoretical gap remains. Traditional applications of the Resource-Based View (RBV) offer deep analytical precision but have predominantly focused on the resources and/or capabilities owned by a single focal firm. This firm-centric lens is insufficient for capturing the relational, multi-actor interdependencies inherent to modern business environments. Conversely, while ecosystem theory maps these complex multilateral structures, it often remains too abstract, lacking the granular analytical tools required to evaluate how resources are actually exchanged, valued, or sustained. Ultimately, strategy scholars have historically examined the ecosystem research stream in isolation from resource-valuation theories, leaving a structural void in how to measure true value co-creation and competitive value appropriation.(Gueler & Schneider, 2021) For the Swedish youth football ecosystem – which is currently experiencing unprecedented commercialization and the influx of new, non-traditional actors – filling this theoretical void is critical. To comprehend this environment from a competitive perspective, one must systematically analyze the dual mechanisms of value contribution and value appropriation. The value an actor contributes to the ecosystem

directly reflects their negotiating power, which in turn dictates how much value they can extract from the joint endeavor. (Gueler & Schneider, 2021) Without a rigorous mechanism to evaluate how value is negotiated among these diverse stakeholders, it is impossible to accurately understand how this new market shape sustains itself. Consequently, actors risk marginalization – unable to capture sufficient value to sustain their competitive advantage in a hyper-competitive environment.

2.3 Theoretical Integration: Toward a Combined Lens

To adequately analyze the strategic value dynamics within the rapidly evolving Swedish football youth academy ecosystem, this study requires a theoretical lens capable of addressing both micro-level resource valuation and macro-level relational interdependencies. Gueler and Schneider (2021) address this exact challenge by proposing a framework that integrates RBV and ecosystem. To account for the fact that ecosystem actors lack formal, hierarchical control over one another, their synthesis also draws on the institutional view to explain how intangible social assets – such as status and legitimacy – facilitate resource exchange. By combining the insights of the RBV and ecosystem theory in a novel way, their framework reveals the underlying linkages and theoretical rationale needed to evaluate interdependent resources. This specific synthesis bridges the gap between these established theories, providing the theoretical necessity required to evaluate how diverse inputs from independent stakeholders collaboratively construct an ecosystem's focal value proposition.

The framework determines the value of an actor's contributed input through four distinct dimensions:

- **Contribution to Value Proposition:** The degree to which the presence of a resource or capability enables the realization of the ecosystem's value proposition, or its absence inhibits it.
- **Scarcity (Bottleneck Input):** The uniqueness of an input that restricts overall growth or performance if constrained, making the input provider highly irreplaceable within the ecosystem.
- **Complementarity:** The degree to which an individual actor's contributed resource complements the existing resources of other actors, reflecting the reality that no single entity can provide the value offering alone.
- **Reputation of the Input Provider:** The degree of reliability and quality of the input, alongside the concomitant image of the provider, which is critical in an ecosystem where actors are highly dependent on one another despite loose formal connections.

While Gueler and Schneider (2021) originally operationalized these four dimensions through a quantitative measurement model, they acknowledge critical boundaries to their approach. The authors note that their quantitative scale is static in nature within an environment characterized by dynamism, thereby only offering a snapshot in time. While the present qualitative study is also cross-sectional, it avoids this static limitation by focusing on mechanistic dynamism. In a market ecosystem, value is not a static noun; it is an active verb driven by continuous negotiations, relationship-building, and resource integration. A quantitative snapshot can identify where the value sits, but qualitative inquiry was methodologically necessary to capture the dynamic mechanisms and active, lived processes

of how that value is co-created and leveraged by actors on a daily basis. Furthermore, they recognize that the ecosystem environment remains a very complex, and in some areas still unknown territory, where ecosystem actors can potentially perceive the value of an input differently due to the subjective nature of latent variables.

Furthermore, the original quantitative measurement model was designed from a unilateral perspective – asking a focal actor to evaluate their own input and negotiating power. As demonstrated by the limitations in Segovia's (2023) research, relying on a unilateral lens inherently restricts the capacity to measure true ecosystem dynamics, which are by definition multilateral. Because the Swedish youth football ecosystem is defined by active relationship-building, continuous market-shaping, and subjective value negotiation among highly diverse actors, a reductionist, unilateral snapshot is insufficient. Instead, an in-depth, multilateral qualitative approach is methodologically necessary to cross-examine these subjective perceptions and empirically map how these four theoretical dimensions actively manifest across multiple foundational actors within this uncharted empirical context.

2.4 Research Questions

Driven by the identified theoretical gaps and the unprecedented commercial transformation of youth academies, this thesis applies Gueler and Schneider's (2021) integrated framework qualitatively to establish a foundational empirical layer. By doing so, it aims to answer the following primary research question:

- How do foundational actors negotiate value contribution and value appropriation within the rapidly commercializing ecosystem of Swedish youth football academies?

To systematically guide this inquiry and extend the theoretical application of the framework, this study will address the following sub-questions:

- SQ1: How do the attributes of contribution, scarcity, complementarity, and reputation manifest among clubs, agents, sponsors, and regulatory bodies in this evolving market?
- SQ2: In what ways does the relational complexity of this ecosystem challenge or extend current quantitative resource-based frameworks?

3. Method

3.1 Research Rationale

Sports organizations often operate within a highly complex web of stakeholders (Correia, 2025). Having this in mind, and in an effort to develop a foundational understanding of the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem – this study adopts a qualitative research design that will be guided by Patton's (2015) principles for qualitative inquiry. This approach aligns well with Correia's (2025) proposal for more extensive qualitative research aimed at inductively identifying the defining characteristics and dynamics of sport ecosystems.

While Gueler and Schneider (2021) originally operationalized these four dimensions through a quantitative measurement model, they acknowledge critical boundaries to their approach. The authors note that their quantitative scale is static in nature within an environment characterized by dynamism, thereby only offering a snapshot in time. While the present qualitative study is also cross-sectional, it avoids this static limitation by focusing on mechanistic dynamism. In a market ecosystem, value is not a static noun; it is an active verb driven by continuous negotiations, relationship-building, and resource integration. A quantitative snapshot can identify where the value sits, but qualitative inquiry was methodologically necessary to capture the dynamic mechanisms and active, lived processes of how that value is co-created and leveraged by actors on a daily basis. This approach is also supported by Patton who explicitly states that qualitative inquiry requires "*methodological appropriateness, design flexibility, and situational responsiveness in the service of utility, not absolute allegiance to some ideal standard of methodological orthodoxy and purity*". (Patton, 2015, p. 139) Furthermore, they recognize that the ecosystem environment remains a very complex, and in some areas still unknown territory, where ecosystem actors can potentially perceive the value of an input differently due to the subjective nature of latent variables. Because these variables are inherently subjective, forcing them into predefined numeric scales risks stripping away their contextual meaning. A qualitative approach directly addresses this limitation by allowing actors to articulate exactly how and why they construct value in their own words. Through in-depth interviews, this study can map this 'unknown territory' by capturing the nuanced, individual realities that a standardized survey would obscure.

Furthermore, the original quantitative measurement model was designed from a unilateral perspective – asking a focal actor to evaluate their own input and negotiating power. As demonstrated by the limitations in Segovia's (2023) research, relying on a unilateral lens inherently restricts the capacity to measure true ecosystem dynamics, which are by definition multilateral. Because the Swedish youth football ecosystem is defined by active relationship-building, continuous market-shaping, and subjective value negotiation among highly diverse actors, a reductionist, unilateral snapshot is insufficient. Instead, an in-depth, multilateral qualitative approach is methodologically necessary to cross-examine these subjective perceptions and empirically map how these four theoretical dimensions actively manifest across multiple foundational actors within this uncharted empirical context.

To enhance the credibility of the study, triangulation will be employed through the integration of observations and in-depth interviews. However, as Patton (2015) clarifies, a common misconception about triangulation is that its purpose is to confirm consistency across data sources. Rather, triangulation is not a validation strategy in the traditional sense, but a means of enriching the depth, breadth, and nuance of understanding by drawing on multiple forms of evidence. To complement interview data and capture the institutional dimension, a systematic sampling of public policy documents referred to as observations was conducted. This allowed for the inclusion of regulatory actors and the formal structures guiding the ecosystem, consistent with Patton's emphasis on triangulating diverse, information-rich sources to deepen understanding and enhance analytic credibility.

This integration serves two purposes. First, it provides institutional context for the qualitative findings, allowing actor-level perspectives to be situated within the broader regulatory environment. Second, it enables cross-level insight by linking individual experiences with

structural enablers or constraints, a core strength of triangulated designs in complex systems research (Patton, 2015 p.478, p.1003). By weaving together experiential and documentary data, the study captures both the lived realities of ecosystem actors and the formal architectures that govern them – thereby offering a more holistic understanding of strategic value dynamics within the Swedish youth football academy ecosystem.

3.2 Interview Participants and Ethical Considerations

While a comprehensive analysis of the entire youth football ecosystem would ideally involve all actor types, this study focuses on clubs, agents, and sponsors – who represent the most established and traditionally central stakeholders in the ecosystem (Ratten, 2011). As this thesis aims to lay a foundational empirical layer, the selection of these “first-order” actors is consistent with ecosystem literature, which advocates focusing on core contributors to the ecosystem’s value proposition (Adner, 2017; Gueler & Schneider, 2021). Furthermore, while players are central to this context, they are not treated as independent strategic actors in this analysis. According to Adner (2017), an ecosystem aligns partners to materialize a 'focal value proposition.' In this market system, the developed player constitutes the focal value proposition – the 'product' of the ecosystem – rather than an independent partner providing strategic inputs. Accordingly, youth players' interactions with the ecosystem are orchestrated by the club, guardians, and agents. Consequently, evaluating the player using Gueler and Schneider’s (2021) strategic input framework would confound the unit of analysis by conflating the ecosystem's output with its strategic input providers. However, having competed in the nation's premier U17 and U19 academy football leagues before advancing to the professional level, the author of this paper leverages this background to serve as a qualitative sensitizing lens for the study.

The interview sample was constructed using a purposive sampling strategy in line with Patton’s (2015) guidance on selecting information-rich cases for in-depth understanding. Stakeholders were chosen based on their strategic embeddedness in the youth football ecosystem and their relevance to the processes of value creation and appropriation. This aligns with Patton’s (2015) principle that cases should be selected for their potential to offer meaningful insights into the system under study. The sample included three club representatives, two player agents, and two sponsors – each representing a distinct yet interconnected role. The sample size was deemed sufficient to capture variation across core stakeholder categories while maintaining analytical depth. All participants were required to be market-leading within their category, ensuring that the insights reflect practices from actors with recognized influence in the Swedish football context. An exception was made for sponsors, where inclusion criteria required at least one year of active partnership with a youth academy, ensuring sustained engagement without demanding national prominence.

Ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the ethical treatment of all participants will remain a central priority throughout both the participant selection process and all subsequent stages of data collection. Participants will be thoroughly briefed on the study’s purpose, the scope of their involvement, and the specific measures implemented to safeguard their privacy and the confidentiality of their data

3.3 Data Sources

This study is based on two forms of primary data: qualitative interviews and document-based observations. Both sources were analyzed through the same theoretical lens to ensure analytical consistency and enable triangulation across actor-level and institutional-level perspectives.

Qualitative Interviews

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposefully selected stakeholders, following Patton's (2015) approach to information-rich sampling in complex systems research. The sample included:

- Three representatives from football clubs,
- Two player agents, and
- Two sponsors.

In addition to meeting the inclusion criteria for purposive sampling, selection of club representation ensured coverage of both operational and strategic perspectives, encompassing the role of an academy coach with day-to-day insights as well as the role of an academy chief offering a broader organisational viewpoint. All three clubs had senior teams competing in either Allsvenskan or Superettan, and each academy was listed in Svensk Elitfotboll's 2024 certification ranking, with several ranked among the top ten nationwide (SEF, 2024). The two agents included in the sample operate globally but are considered industry leaders within the Scandinavian region, while the two sponsors represent local firms with long-standing community engagement in youth football.

Observations

To capture the institutional layer of the ecosystem, a structured document analysis was conducted using publicly available policies and governance materials from key regulatory bodies presented below

Institution	Description	Source of data
Svenska Fotbollförbundet (SvFF)	National football governance	Primary; Official website
Riksidrottsförbundet (RF)	Umbrella body for Swedish sport	Primary; Riksdagens website
FIFA	Global regulatory authority	Primary; Official website

3.4 Overall Procedure

This section provides an overview of the sequential research process employed in this study, outlining how the different data sources and techniques were integrated to generate a multi-dimensional understanding of the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem.

The research process began with systematic observations of public policy documents, which were analytically coded using the four dimensions of Gueler and Schneider's (2021)

framework. Each regulation or institutional guideline was classified under one of the framework's dimensions – *contribution to value proposition, scarcity, complementarity, or reputation* – enabling structured comparison with the stakeholder perspectives gathered in later stages.These observations were sampled to capture the ecosystem's formal regulatory and structural components, particularly those shaping stakeholder behavior, resource allocation, and strategic positioning. This approach ensured that the institutional context was not merely described, but theoretically anchored in the same conceptual framework applied to the interview data. An inductive or hybrid approach would risk generating a massive amount of unstructured data that lacked strategic focus due to the complexity of this ecosystem. Furthermore, as this study explicitly seeks to evaluate strategic value through the integrated RBV-ecosystem framework proposed by Gueler and Schneider (2021), approaches other than a primarily deductive design would have been theoretically misaligned with the study's conceptual objectives. Nevertheless, methodological flexibility was maintained through the use of analytical memos, which are discussed in greater detail in Section 3.5.

In the second phase, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposely selected stakeholders: Three club representatives where two were coaches for day-to-day operations and one academy chief for more holistic insights, two player agents, and two sponsors. Interviews are scheduled based on participant availability, aiming for a duration of 60 to 90 minutes to facilitate in-depth discussions. The interviews followed a thematic guide structured around the same four-dimensional framework used in the observation phase.Importantly, Gueler and Schneider's dimensions were utilized as "sensitizing concepts" (Patton, 2015). Rather than acting as definitive quantitative measurement tools, they provided a necessary theoretical container and a flexible jumping-off point to guide thematic coding. This approach allowed the research to explore how these value dimensions manifest organically in the real world of youth football ecosystems. Minor adjustments were made to the interview guides to suit specific stakeholder groups, reflecting Patton's (2015) recommendation to balance thematic consistency with contextual sensitivity. Each interview was carried out in two sub-phases.

In alignment with Patton's (2015) recommendations for engaging participants in conceptually grounded interviews, the first sub-phase focused on orienting participants to the framework. To facilitate understanding, each dimension was explained using familiar real-world analogies – for example, Apple's iOS integration strategy as an illustration of contribution to value proposition; lithium battery producers in electric vehicle ecosystems as a case of scarcity; component manufacturers in computer ecosystems to explain *complementarity*; and FC Barcelona's La Masia academy to highlight *reputation of the input provider*. This approach reflects Patton's guidance on using concrete examples and analogies to facilitate participant understanding of complex constructs. Once the participant demonstrated a clear grasp of the framework, they completed a Likert-scale exercise, seen in Figure 1, rating their perceived position along each of the four dimensions by answering the questions from 1 to 10. This elicitation technique (Patton, 2015 p.884, p.510, p.482) ensured that participants not only understood the conceptual categories but also reflected on their own role and positioning within the ecosystem.

The second sub-phase of the interview consisted of open-ended, in-depth questions tailored to each stakeholder group. These questions, seen in Figure 2,3 and 4, were designed to

elicit detailed narratives and reflections about value creation, appropriation, and strategic interdependencies. Also, to ensure that the interviewer does not risk becoming too involved, which can cloud judgment, or remain too distant, which can reduce understanding – empathic neutrality (Patton, 2015 p.112) will be employed through probes and by communicating understanding of the interviewee's situation and perspective without judgement. The prior Likert exercise served both as a warm-up and a cognitive primer, helping participants articulate their perspectives more precisely during this second phase. More details regarding the interviews can be seen in Figure 5. This structure is consistent with Patton's recommendations to begin with structured, engaging prompts and progress toward in-depth, context-sensitive inquiry tailored to participants' lived experiences and strategic perspectives – enabling a richer understanding of context and individual meaning-making.

3.5 Data Analysis

In analyzing regulatory data, each observation was coded using the four dimensions of the Gueler and Schneider (2021) framework. During analysis, it became clear that several individual regulations were not stand-alone directives, but rather components of broader institutional frameworks – mirroring how ecosystems often consist of nested and interdependent structures. In response to this, the analysis treated such umbrella frameworks as the primary unit of observation, classified under the dimension most reflective of their strategic intent. Within each observation, a selection of specific sub-regulations was then discussed in further detail, not as separate analytical units, but as illustrative expressions of how the overarching framework contributes to value creation or coordination in practice. (Patton, 2015 p. 464) These sub-regulations were included based on their relevance to the framework's strategic function within the ecosystem, enabling a richer understanding of how regulatory intent translates into operational mechanisms without fragmenting the analysis across multiple dimensions.

Interview data were subjected to the same deductive coding approach, ensuring analytical consistency across both institutional and actor-level perspectives. Each transcript was first reviewed in full to establish contextual familiarity, after which relevant statements were coded under the framework's four dimensions. When a participant's statement addressed more than one dimension, it was coded according to the dimension most reflective of its primary intent. However, because resources within a human-capital ecosystem frequently possess multi-dimensional utility, forcing them into mutually exclusive categories risks theoretical undervaluation. To systematically capture this theoretical friction without abandoning the framework's structure, analytical memoing was employed. Patton (2015) strongly advocates for the use of reflective memos during analysis to document emergent insights, track conceptual overlap, and critique the limitations of deductive frameworks in real-time. While almost all identified resources exhibited secondary linkages across multiple dimensions, creating overlapping codes for every instance would have exponentially increased complexity and diluted the study's primary objective. Because the fundamental aim of this thesis is to lay a foundational empirical layer mapping the multilateral interdependencies of the ecosystem – rather than to perfectly engineer a new multidimensional coding scheme – the analysis prioritized clarity. Consequently, the author maintained the singular primary codes but generated targeted analytical memos for instances where the framework most obviously undervalued a resource's multi-dimensional

impact. To manage complexity in the reporting phase, one highly illustrative memo per dimension was selected for inclusion in the results. This approach ensures the foundational mapping remains clear, while formally documenting the framework's qualitative limitations for future theoretical expansion. The coding process thus prioritized capturing both explicit descriptions of value contributions and the underlying mechanisms through which these occurred, enabling systematic comparison across actors while allowing for nuanced interpretation of strategic interdependencies.

5. Results

This section presents the study's findings on value contributions and appropriations within the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem, highlighting the interplay between regulatory frameworks, stakeholder relationships, and the strategic resources that shape competitive advantage and long-term ecosystem health.

5.1 Observations from Regulatory Bodies

At the international level, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) sets the overarching regulatory framework for global football, establishing rules on player transfers, agent licensing, youth protection, and financial governance that all member associations must follow. These regulations cascade down through national and regional structures, influencing how Swedish academies operate and interact with other stakeholders. Within Sweden, Riksidrottsförbundet (RF) functions as the national umbrella organisation for sports, providing overarching governance, policy coordination, and integrity standards across all affiliated sports, including football. Operating within this framework, the Swedish Football Association (SvFF) serves as the national governing body for football, responsible for regulation, strategic development, and alignment with both national and international standards, including those mandated by FIFA. Complementing SvFF's governance role, Svensk Elitfotboll (SEF) represents Sweden's top professional leagues, Allsvenskan and Superettan, focusing on enhancing the commercial profile, competitiveness, and visibility of Swedish elite football, with reputational effects extending to youth academies.

5.1a Contribution to value proposition

Regulatory body

SvFF's Sustainability Model functions as a comprehensive framework aimed at promoting the long-term social, educational, and financial sustainability of Swedish football. It conceptualizes youth development not solely as a pipeline for elite performance, but as a strategic mechanism for fostering societal contribution, community cohesion, and inclusive participation. The model is grounded in several philosophical pillars, each operationalized through specific policies that shape how value is generated and distributed within the youth academy ecosystem.

One such policy is the No Result Recording Rule, which is embedded within the Play, Learn, and Grow ("Spela, lek och lär") philosophy – a child-centered approach that emphasizes enjoyment, learning, and holistic development over early competitive outcomes. By removing

formal league standings and match scorekeeping for younger age groups, the policy is designed to reduce performance pressure, promote psychological safety, and encourage sustained participation. Within the ecosystem, this rule aims to enhance the collective value proposition by cultivating a broader and potentially more resilient player base, which may benefit a wide range of stakeholders.

Under the model's financial sustainability pillar, the Education Compensation mechanism represents another key regulatory instrument. It mandates financial remuneration to clubs that have contributed to the development of players who subsequently sign professional contracts or are transferred. This policy seeks to establish a feedback mechanism that rewards early-stage investment, thereby supporting the long-term financial viability of youth development. It also aligns incentives across the ecosystem by recognizing that value creation often begins at stages preceding market visibility.

Collectively, these and other components of the SvFF Sustainability Model articulate a strategic ecosystem approach in which broad-based participation, ethically grounded development, and long-term resource circulation are treated as integral to value creation. Rather than focusing exclusively on elite outcomes, the model aims to support the ecosystem's structural resilience and legitimacy by embedding social and financial sustainability into its core value proposition.

Memo Insight

The No Result Recording Rule is categorized under contribution to the value proposition because it cultivates a broader, more resilient player base by removing early competitive pressure. However, classifying it solely within this dimension undervalues its structural impact across the ecosystem. It acts as a powerful complementary resource that directly alters and aligns the operational behavior of clubs and agents – allowing them to focus entirely on long-term player growth rather than immediate league table results. Furthermore, the rule serves as a reputational asset for SvFF by institutionalizing a child-centered approach.

Clubs

Clubs, through their youth academies, operate as core engines of value creation in the Swedish football ecosystem. They function as institutional arenas for capability building, where structured training environments produce both sporting and personal competencies essential to the ecosystem's sustainability. Across interviews, a recurring theme was the emphasis on holistic player development – blending technical skill acquisition, tactical education, physical conditioning, and psychological resilience. As one academy coach noted, "*We document everything, from individual development talks and match minutes to self-assessments and mental wellbeing. It helps players but also ensures continuity even when coaches change.*" This formalised data infrastructure – supported by tools such as 360Player, AI-powered video analysis and other AI-driven tools – underpins consistent, evidence-based training environments that strengthen player development quality across all age groups.

By actively managing the internal movement of players within the development pipeline, clubs maintain structural alignment across age groups and competitive levels. As one academy chief explained, *"We rotate players – a 17-year-old may train with the first team to get challenged. And senior players recovering from injury train with the U19s. It's about creating the right stimulation at the right time."* Such adaptive coordination strengthens the ecosystem's talent pipeline by ensuring that developmental environments are continuously calibrated to match the evolving needs of each player.

In some contexts, this value contribution is further shaped by geographic recruitment boundaries. One academy chief explained that maintaining a strict 30-40 minute travel radius for new recruits helps preserve strong community ties while concentrating scouting resources. From an ecosystem perspective, this identification method reinforces local identity, deepens community bonds, and fosters long-term loyalty between players, families, and the club — creating social cohesion that supports both player retention and the wider health of the football network.

Memo Insight
While the formalised data infrastructure is categorized as contributing to the core value proposition by creating better players, treating it purely as an internal club capability ignores its role as a scarcity resource and a point of complementarity. The data isn't just a training tool; it creates a structural advantage and aligns different stakeholders (coaches, parents, players) around a single source of truth.

Agents

Agents contribute to the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem by providing highly individualized player support that extends beyond the scope of most clubs' developmental resources. As one agent put it: *"We help them with everything – investments, financial planning, career advice – whatever they need to succeed in the long run."* This guiding principle highlights their long-term, player-centric approach, where success is measured not only by immediate performance gains but by sustained career progression and personal wellbeing.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the emphasis on continuity and presence. As one agent explained, "*you can't relax for a year or two, because then you lose directly… you need to be there, both in good times and bad.*" Such presence is demonstrated through consistent match attendance, post-match analysis, and targeted advice – addressing both technical performance, for instance by telling a midfielder "y*ou made some great passes, good passing percentage,*" and mental wellbeing, recognising when "*players have a tough period mentally… then it's about dealing with the problem and solving it.*" This close and sustained engagement fosters an environment in which players feel encouraged to share sensitive personal challenges, underscoring a fundamental distinction in stakeholder alignment. Beyond their developmental role, agents also act as intermediaries between players and other ecosystem actors, facilitating communication, negotiations, and strategic decision-making. In this "middleman" capacity, they translate the needs and perspectives of players into terms that resonate with clubs, sponsors, and media, thereby maximising opportunities and reducing the risk of misunderstandings.

Through this dual role – providing targeted, individualised coaching and serving as both trusted confidants and strategic intermediaries – agents enhance the overall ecosystem by sustaining personalised development trajectories that might otherwise be deprioritised within competitive team environments. In doing so, they operate as complementary actors whose player-first orientation not only supports on-field performance but also reinforces the holistic development pillar of the Swedish youth football value proposition.

Sponsors

Sponsors contribute to the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem by providing essential financial and material support that underpins day-to-day operations and long-term sustainability. In some cases, this involvement is deeply personal, as one sponsor explained: "*It's mostly personal – my son plays there… he's there every weekend, and I see what it takes to run the team… equipment, coaches, travel, and so on.*" Such contributions are motivated by a desire to directly support not only their own child but "*the rest of the kids*" in the team, highlighting how sponsorship often emerges from community ties and personal engagement rather than purely commercial objectives. Beyond individual motivations, sponsors also see their role as reinforcing the club's local presence and reputation. One sponsor noted, "*Newly arrived residents should be able to see the logo and address… the club still has a strong local name*" By maintaining visibility through sponsorship, these partners help strengthen the club's community identity, which in turn supports youth recruitment and fosters pride among players and supporters.

In both cases, the sponsors' contributions extend beyond brand exposure. They are perceived as investments in youth development, community engagement, and the long-term viability of local football structures. Whether motivated by personal connection or brand alignment, sponsors help sustain the operational infrastructure that allows academies to provide consistent training environments, competitive opportunities, and a sense of belonging for young athletes.

5.1b Scarcity (Bottleneck Resources)

Regulatory body

The *51% Rule*, enforced by Riksidrottsförbundet (RF), stipulates that all clubs participating in the Swedish league system must operate as member-owned, non-profit organizations. In cases where a club establishes a commercial entity (e.g., a limited company) to manage its professional football operations, the parent non-profit club is required to retain at least 51% of the voting rights in that entity. As a foundational component of Swedish sports governance, the rule is intended to maintain democratic control over strategic decision-making, granting ultimate authority to the club's members – typically composed of local supporters and community stakeholders. This governance structure aims to reduce the risk of full external or investor dominance and to preserve the club's identity, traditions, and long-term orientation in alignment with collective rather than private interests. Within the youth football ecosystem, the rule functions as a regulatory constraint that limits the extent to which clubs can attract external capital or pursue large-scale commercial expansion. Resources such as community-based legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and governance alignment are emphasized as strategically important under these regulatory conditions.

These elements shape how clubs operate and position themselves within the broader academy system, particularly in relation to sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and institutional credibility.

Clubs

While many aspects of Swedish youth football training are regarded as broadly replicable, certain club-level capabilities retain scarcity value within the ecosystem. For some academies, scarcity arises from structural advantages in managing the talent pipeline. One coach observed that the ability to field multiple teams within the same elite youth series provides additional opportunities for players to gain high-level match experience within a single club. This expanded capacity enables a larger number of players to be consistently tested against strong competition, thereby strengthening the club's attractiveness as a development destination. It also confers a competitive advantage in first-team selection, while regulatory mechanisms – such as education compensation – ensure that clubs benefit financially if non-selected players transfer elsewhere. In the ecosystem context, however, the number of clubs able to sustain such structures is limited, making this capability difficult to replicate.

At the same time, not all interviewees agreed that scarcity in training methodology is attainable in contemporary Swedish football. Most clubs emphasized that prevailing training models are fundamentally replicable, with no single academy possessing an irreplaceable methodology. As one coach noted, "*No academy has a secret recipe — the real difference is in execution and continuity*." This perspective suggests that, within the current ecosystem, scarcity is less a function of proprietary drills or technology and more a product of cumulative advantages derived from brand credibility, recruitment reach, and structural positioning in competitive access.

Agents

A key differentiator cited by the interviewees was the unique experiential capital held by senior agency members, many of whom have "*been at the very highest level… won major championships… they know what it takes.*" This direct elite-level experience provides insight that competitors without such backgrounds cannot easily replicate. One agent emphasised that this depth of knowledge is rare: "*If you look at the industry today… only a handful have the experience … the majority don't know what it takes, and they can't relate to being a full professional at the highest level.*" This perspective enables more nuanced career guidance, particularly when advising players on decisions that shape long-term development and marketability. Scarcity is also reinforced by the agency's access to high-cost analytical tools such as Wyscout, which allows them to monitor player performances worldwide in granular detail. "Not everyone can afford it… it costs around 70,000 SEK a year," the agent noted, underscoring the barrier to entry for smaller or newer agencies. Combined with the financial capacity to invest in travel, scouting, and tailored performance analysis, these resources create an operational advantage not readily accessible to less capitalised competitors.

Thus, while the basic business model of player representation may be structurally similar across agencies, scarcity emerges from a combination of elite-level experience and resource-intensive infrastructure. These factors collectively strengthen the agency's

bargaining power within the ecosystem, enabling them to secure and retain high-potential talent in a competitive market.

Memo Insight

The unique experiential capital held by senior agency members, many of whom have "*won major championships"* and *"know what it takes.*" This scarcity directly generates reputation. The public credibility of former high-profile professionals serves as a trust signal that attracts talent. It also enhances complementarity; because these agents have "been at the very highest level," they can provide highly nuanced career guidance and psychological support that complements the club's on-field training.

Sponsors

While financial sponsorship is a common feature of youth football, certain contributions stand out due to their scarcity and the unique value they provide within the ecosystem. For some sponsors, the differentiating factor lies not in the size of the monetary contribution but in the depth of personal involvement. As one sponsor explained, "*It's not about money—others could probably give more. The difference is that I'm there every weekend… talking to the coaches, knowing what they need.*" This "hands-on" presence provides a form of operational support that most sponsors do not offer, allowing the club to address immediate needs quickly and with trusted partners. Similarly, one restaurant owner noted that when the club needs food for events, "*it's the restaurant they call,*" underscoring the unique value of in-kind support compared to monetary donations. While acknowledging that there are other restaurants, the ability to fulfil these needs rapidly and with minimal coordination distinguishes the contribution in practice.

In both cases, scarcity arises from a combination of accessibility, trust-based relationships, and the ability to provide tailored, immediate resources – qualities that are difficult to replicate through standard sponsorship models. This positions such sponsors as dependable problem-solvers within the ecosystem, offering a form of value that extends beyond traditional funding streams.

5.1c Complementarity

Regulatory body

The FIFA Football Agent License System mandates that all agents involved in player transfers and contract negotiations hold a valid FIFA license. This regulation introduces formal certification requirements, legal compliance standards, and ethical guidelines governing agent activity across all levels of football, including youth academies. Within the Swedish youth football academy ecosystem, the system functions as a mechanism of structured interdependence. By standardizing agent qualifications and conduct, it aims to align agent operations with those of clubs, players, and federations—thereby reducing risks related to exploitation and conflicts of interest. Crucially, this umbrella regulation enables the enforcement of more specific rules at the national level, several of which are further reinforced by SvFF. These include the Agent Dual Representation Restriction, which prohibits agents from representing both the player and the club in the same negotiation –

thereby promoting clear role delineation and ethical boundaries among stakeholders. Additionally, FIFA's own cap on agent commissions at 10% of a player's contract or transfer fee is designed to limit excessive appropriation and reinforce financial fairness, especially in youth-related transactions. Within the ecosystem, this cap contributes to ethical consistency and trust among agents, players, and clubs. Furthermore, the requirement by SvFF for the formal involvement of legal guardians in all football-related decisions involving minors strengthens intergenerational accountability and ensures that agents operate transparently when dealing with vulnerable players. Together, these layered regulations illustrate how the agent license system acts not only as a gatekeeper for market access, but also as the foundation for a coordinated, ethical, and functionally complementary role for agents within the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem.

Clubs

A central complementarity lies in the integration of educational partnerships to align football training with academic progress to prepare players for success in and outside football. Multiple clubs described formal agreements with schools that adjust timetables for training and competitions, ensuring that players receive both high-quality football development and consistent academic support. As one academy chief explained, "*We want our players to attend schools where they can combine football with education — that's a big goal for us.*" Such arrangements not only serve the players but also strengthen the wider ecosystem by modelling dual-career pathways that other actors can adopt. Clubs also complement their on-field development programmes with life skills initiatives provided by external partners. These include financial literacy workshops delivered by banks and CV-writing sessions through labour market agencies, offering capabilities that the clubs could not deliver independently. One coach noted, "*We bring in people from the bank to teach the kids about saving and planning their finances,*" highlighting how such collaborations broaden the developmental scope without diluting football-specific priorities.

Partnerships extend into the technological domain, where clubs employ analytical software and data platforms to deepen player evaluation and coordination. Tools such as 360Player and AI-powered video analysis systems are often supported by external service providers, enabling capabilities that would be resource-intensive to develop in-house. These systems allow for detailed performance tracking and long-term development documentation.

Regulatory bodies also shape complementarity through institutional frameworks intended to align actors. The no record rule for younger age groups, for instance, was welcomed by some coaches for enabling academies to focus entirely on development without the distortion of league table pressures. As one coach explained, removing results at early ages *"lets us focus on the next match and the player's growth instead of worrying about…the table."* However, other rules were seen as counterproductive. The education compensation model, which allocates higher transfer fees to clubs with senior teams in top divisions, was criticised by one coach as discouraging smaller or lower-tier academies from investing in player development: *"Why should a club with fewer resources get so much less for developing the same player?"* Such perceived imbalances risk undermining the shared incentive structure that complementarity depends upon. These strategic partnerships enable integrated pathways that combine football training, education, and life skills development.

These complementarities are further shaped by regulatory frameworks, which can either align incentives or create tensions.

Agents

Complementarity for agents in the Swedish youth football academy ecosystem stems from their ability to operate as connective tissue between players, clubs, families, and other stakeholders. A central part of their practice involves maintaining "*a constant dialogue with the clubs*" to align on player development priorities. As one agent explained, "*the younger they are, the more we talk to the club…the older they get, the more that relationship is managed directly between club and player.*" This graduated involvement ensures that developmental goals remain consistent across the different actors engaged in the player's career. Agents also work closely with families, "*it's a very close contact relationship so that we know what happens behind the scenes"*. This includes identifying when private problems are disturbing in the background or when financial issues limit access because "*some parents simply can't afford".* In such cases, the agent may intervene directly to provide solutions or financial support, ensuring that personal challenges do not derail sporting development. This open, transparent relationship with parents is viewed as very important in creating an environment where the player's needs are understood in their full context.

Externally, agents collaborate with sponsors, media, and in some cases schools, to expand opportunities for players and enhance their market profile. Such networks allow agents to act as strategic amplifiers of a player's visibility and career trajectory. By integrating these connections, agents complement the work of clubs and other stakeholders by ensuring that the player's off-field environment is stable, their development priorities are aligned across stakeholders, and their market exposure is optimised. This capacity to bridge institutional boundaries and maintain multi-channel coordination enhances both the individual's prospects and the overall coherence of the ecosystem's talent pipeline.

Memo Insight

The agent's role as connective tissue between players, clubs, families, and other stakeholders is categorized under complementarity because the agent bridges institutional boundaries. However, by only viewing this as a complementary bridging function, it drastically undervalues the agent's direct contribution to the value proposition due to spill-over effects from agent interventions such as financial support that keep the player in the ecosystem entirely.

Sponsors

Complementarity in sponsorship arises when financial or in-kind contributions enable other ecosystem actors – such as coaches, parents, and club management – to concentrate on their core functions. As one sponsor explained, their support "*covers the basics, so the coaches can focus on training and the parents on supporting… the club doesn't have to chase money constantly.*" By filling this practical gap, sponsorship ensures that essential resources – such as equipment, travel, and event logistics – are secured, allowing the academy's sporting and developmental priorities to proceed without disruption.

Joint efforts, although often informal, further demonstrate how sponsorship can complement other stakeholder contributions. One sponsor described their involvement as assisting with *"the team's internal football events… it's more a case of what do you need? I'll help"* rather than engaging in structured collaboration. These contributions can be magnified when combined with other forms of support. A prior youth tournament was cited as an example: one sponsor funded tents and referees, a local restaurant donated food, and "*another parent contributed a social media campaign.*" Together, these inputs generated a more extensive community event than the club could have delivered independently.

While the sponsors showed satisfaction with this flexible, needs-based approach, some expressed interest in moving beyond purely transactional arrangements. One sponsor advocated for "*more communication and long-term thinking… see sponsorship as a partnership, not just money,*" suggesting initiatives such as monthly email updates and opportunities to provide input on club decisions. Such aspirations may enhance operational alignment and mutual value creation; however, they could intersect with governance boundaries, particularly those established by the 51% rule.

5.1d Reputation of the Input Provider

Regulatory body

Within the Swedish football youth academy ecosystem, SvFF and SEF act as the primary custodians of the sport's collective reputation. SvFF's role as the national governing body involves enforcing its regulatory frameworks, ensuring that governance practices, developmental standards, and ethical principles are consistently upheld across all levels of the game. In doing so, Swedish football is perceived as credible and well-governed both domestically and internationally. This reputation serves as a form of institutional capital, enabling trust among stakeholders, facilitating collaboration with global governing bodies such as FIFA and UEFA, and maintaining public confidence in the sport's developmental structures.

SEF, representing the professional leagues *Allsvenskan* and *Superettan*, plays a complementary role by promoting the visibility, competitiveness, and brand image of Swedish elite football. Its primary focus is on the top-tier product consumed by fans, media, and sponsors, and it is responsible for creating and managing the collective brand of the leagues. This includes negotiating and managing media rights on behalf of all clubs, securing broadcasting agreements that provide both a strong financial foundation and broad exposure. SEF also attracts league-wide sponsors, enhancing the profile and prestige of the competitions. Through coordinated marketing campaigns – often centered on themes such as fan passion, competitive spirit, and social values – SEF actively works to tell the story of Swedish elite football.These initiatives intends to reinforce the perception of Sweden as both a producer of top-tier talent and a professionally managed football market, a reputation that extends to and enhances the legitimacy of youth academies.

Together, SvFF and SEF act as reputation orchestrators, ensuring that the brand of Swedish football remains associated with trust, professionalism, and player development quality. This reputational capital operates as an intangible but strategically significant resource within the

ecosystem — one that directly influences the opportunities, partnerships, and market positioning available to youth academies.

Clubs

Reputation functions as a critical, intangible resource within the Swedish youth football ecosystem, shaping both the attractiveness of clubs to prospective talent and their influence among other stakeholders. For some, the academy's reputation is directly leveraged as a recruitment tool. One coach acknowledged, *"Much of recruitment happens because of the badge — players know we develop professionals."* Such brand strength acts as a signalling mechanism to players, parents, and even sponsors and agents, indicating a proven track record of turning youth prospects into elite-level athletes. This perceived reliability is often built on years of consistent strong results. Reputational capital also grants access to competitive and commercial opportunities not equally available to all ecosystem actors. Invitations to elite international tournaments — featuring top European academies — were cited as opportunities afforded by brand prestige. These events not only challenge players in high-quality match environments but also reinforce the academy's standing among global peers, further strengthening its appeal to ambitious players. Visibility in media and active partnerships with sponsors further amplify the brand, creating a virtuous cycle in which reputation attracts resources that, in turn, sustain and enhance developmental capacity.

Furthermore, several clubs cultivate a reputation for integrity by avoiding overreliance on agents and maintaining a strong welfare focus. Clear communication with parents about the club's values and expectations is central to this approach, ensuring that the brand is associated not only with sporting success but also with holistic player care. Reputational capital operates as a high-leverage asset within the ecosystem. By signalling credibility, clubs' reputations amplify the impact of their developmental work and strengthen their position within the Swedish youth football ecosystem.

Memo Insight

A club's brand is categorized under the reputation of the input provider, acting as a signaling mechanism that attracts prospective talent because players know the academy develops professionals. However, limiting the badge to a reputational asset severely undervalues its mechanical utility within the ecosystem. The brand acts as a bottleneck resource that serves as an access key to elite international tournaments and exclusive European networks. Additionally, it functions as a complementary multiplier that attracts sponsorships and financial resources, which in turn directly fund and expand the academy's core operational and developmental capabilities. Crucially, when evaluated through a multilateral lens, this multidimensional utility expands far beyond the focal organization. The reputational capital of the club badge actively amplifies the operational capacity of other ecosystem actors. For instance, it significantly enhances the ability of partnering agents to sign emerging players and negotiate advantageous transfers with competing organizations, while simultaneously elevating the local visibility and community trust of affiliated sponsors.

Agents

Reputation emerges as one of the agency's most strategically significant assets within the Swedish youth football ecosystem. One agent described their standing as *"among the best reputations in the business in Sweden,"* a perception reinforced by the presence of high-profile former professionals. Their public credibility serves as both a trust signal and a safeguard – "*we would never risk burning anyone… it would come out in the media straight away*". This reputational capital not only attracts talent but also strengthens the agency's negotiating position with clubs, sponsors, and media. In one of the agent's words, "*if you have the player, you have the power in this business,*" underscoring the interplay between reputation and market leverage. Protecting this asset requires deliberate caution and consistency. As explained by one agent, "*we are very careful… we go through how we should approach the player, how we should say things to the club… everything needs to be thought through.*" Such disciplined conduct minimises the risk of damaged relationships, which the agent stressed could quickly undermine years of work.

While no formal external brand strategy has been mentioned, an agency's reputation is reinforced organically through results – "*the better work we do for our players… the closer we are to them… the bigger the deals we make.*" Over time, this success creates a snowball effect, generating stronger partnerships, increased financing, and higher player retention. These outcomes not only benefit the agency but also enhance the perceived professionalism and reliability of the wider Swedish youth football ecosystem.

Sponsors

Interviewees commonly expressed the aspiration to be perceived as genuine community partners, as opposed to purely transactional contributors. One sponsor explained that their contribution is "*time and effort, not just money,*" hoping it makes the brand more personal and trustworthy. This emphasis on hands-on involvement differentiates them from sponsors whose engagement is limited to financial transfers, fostering a perception of authenticity and commitment among parents, players, and club staff. For another sponsor, the goal is to be recognised as "*a local and friendly place… more like a neighbour who supports the team*" rather than a corporate sponsor seeking visibility. This approach is reinforced by long-term loyalty – remaining committed to the club "*even when things have gone badly on the pitch*" – which strengthens credibility and aligns with the values of grassroots football.

Internally, brand maintenance tends to rely on core business practices rather than formalised sponsorship strategies. As one noted, there are "*no concrete actions… just delivering good quality to customers,*" while another stressed "*focusing on good food, and the product sells itself.*" Externally, reputation is sustained through transparency with the club, word-of-mouth, and the organic exposure generated when, for instance "*players share us on social media.*" Even without a formal media strategy, these informal endorsements help sustain positive brand associations. While both sponsors acknowledge it is hard to track direct customer acquisition from sponsorship, they recognise secondary benefits – such as parents remembering the business name or the community associating the brand with youth sport. Over time, this reinforces their positioning as trustworthy, community-embedded actors whose involvement contributes not only to the club's operational health but also to the perceived integrity of the wider ecosystem.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to understand how "*foundational actors negotiate value contribution and value appropriation within the rapidly commercializing ecosystem of Swedish youth football academies*". The findings reveal that this negotiation is not a simple transactional exchange, but a highly complex, ongoing process of "coopetition." Actors constantly balance the need to cooperate – aligning their resources to produce elite players and sustain community legitimacy – with the need to compete for financial returns, market positioning, and developmental influence. Ultimately, value in this ecosystem is negotiated through a delicate interplay of regulatory constraints, trust-based relational bridging, and the leveraging of multidimensional, intangible assets.

How do the attributes of contribution, scarcity, complementarity, and reputation manifest among clubs, agents, sponsors, and regulatory bodies in this evolving market?

Contribution to the Value Proposition

Gueler and Schneider (2021) propose that the higher the contribution of a resource to the ecosystem's focal value proposition, the higher its value for the ecosystem and the individual actor. In this context, the focal value proposition is the holistic development of the youth player. The findings confirm that all foundational actors must contribute distinctly to this proposition to justify their involvement. Clubs act as the primary engine of value creation, contributing structured training environments, formalized data infrastructure, and community-embedded development pipelines. However, because clubs focus heavily on collective team environments, agents contribute highly individualized, long-term welfare and career support that clubs cannot provide at scale. Sponsors contribute the essential financial and material baselines that sustain daily operations, often driven by personal community ties rather than pure commercial intent. Finally, regulatory bodies establish the foundational parameters of this value creation – such as the "Play, Learn, and Grow" philosophy – ensuring that the ecosystem prioritizes sustainable, long-term player development over short-term competitive exploitation.

Complementarity

Ecosystem theory dictates that because the value proposition relies on a set of distinct resources, no single actor can create the value offering alone (Jacobides et al., 2018). Gueler and Schneider argue that a higher degree of complementarity increases a resource's value. This is highly evident in the Swedish youth football network, which thrives on structured interdependence. For example, clubs achieve complementarity by partnering with external schools to create dual-career pathways and utilizing third-party technological tools (e.g., 360Player) to enhance their core coaching capabilities. Agents act as the ultimate complementary connective tissue; by maintaining continuous dialogue with clubs, families, and sponsors, they bridge institutional boundaries to ensure a player's off-field stability complements their on-field performance. Furthermore, sponsors provide the complementary material relief that allows coaches to focus strictly on athletic development. However, the findings also highlight that complementarity requires aligned incentives; when regulatory mechanisms like the education compensation model are perceived as structurally imbalanced, it threatens the collaborative alignment necessary for ecosystem health.

Scarcity and Bottleneck Resources

Gueler and Schneider posit that possessing a "bottleneck" resource – one that is difficult to attain and restricts overall growth if constrained – grants an actor higher value appropriation potential by limiting intra-ecosystem rivalry (Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018). In the Swedish context, scarcity is driven less by proprietary training methodologies (which are largely replicable) and more by structural positioning and experiential capital. For agents, scarcity manifests as elite-level experiential knowledge (former professionals who have "won major championships") combined with access to high-cost analytical infrastructure (e.g., Wyscout), creating a barrier to entry that elevates their negotiating power. For clubs, scarcity emerges from structural capacities, such as the scale required to field multiple elite teams, which provides exclusive developmental opportunities that smaller academies cannot replicate. Interestingly, at the macro level, the 51% rule acts as an ecosystem-wide regulatory bottleneck. By artificially restricting the inflow of external commercial capital, this rule makes community-based legitimacy and trust the scarcest and most valuable resources for Swedish clubs.

Reputation of the Input Provider

Finally, because ecosystem actors operate autonomously and rely on indirect ties, Gueler and Schneider emphasize that a partner's high reputation for reliability is critical for reducing inherent uncertainty. The findings strongly support this, revealing that reputation operates as a high-leverage strategic asset. At the institutional level, SvFF and SEF orchestrate the collective brand of Swedish football, creating a halo of trust and professionalism that cascades down to youth academies. For clubs, the academy "badge" serves as a powerful reputational signal that attracts prospective talent and opens doors to exclusive international networks. For agents, public credibility and disciplined conduct are their most fiercely protected assets; a strong reputation directly dictates their ability to retain players and negotiate favorable terms. Similarly, sponsors leverage long-term loyalty and hands-on involvement to cultivate an authentic, "local neighbor" reputation, differentiating themselves from purely transactional corporate entities.

In summary, the attributes of contribution, complementarity, scarcity, and reputation are deeply embedded in the operations of clubs, agents, sponsors, and regulators. By validating these propositions, the findings establish that competitive advantage in the Swedish youth football ecosystem is not achieved through isolated resource ownership, but through the strategic orchestration of these four multidimensional dynamics.

In what ways does the relational complexity of this ecosystem challenge or extend current quantitative resource-based frameworks?

While the empirical findings validate the presence of Gueler and Schneider's (2021) four dimensions within the Swedish youth football ecosystem, the relational complexity of this environment fundamentally challenges how these dimensions are traditionally operationalized. To answer this question, this study contributes to the strategic management literature by extending the integrated resource-based ecosystem framework in three specific theoretical directions.

Contextual Boundary Testing: From Technology to Human Capital

The foundational literature of ecosystem theory, from Moore's initial conceptualization in 1993 to Gueler and Schneider’s recent synthesis in 2021, has been developed and validated almost exclusively within technology-intensive, platform, or manufacturing industries. In such traditional contexts like mobility networks or software platforms, strategic resources are often tangible or legally protectable, taking the form of patents, algorithms, or physical infrastructure.

This thesis extends the boundary conditions of the integrated framework by applying it to a deeply embedded, human-capital-centric environment. The findings demonstrate that the core logic of the framework holds in sports ecosystems, yet the nature of the resources shifts dramatically. Within the Swedish youth football ecosystem, value is overwhelmingly derived from intangible, socially constructed assets. These include a sponsor’s local authenticity, an agent’s elite-level experiential capital, and the community trust necessitated by the fifty-one percent rule. By successfully mapping these dimensions, this study proves that the synthesis of the Resource-Based View and ecosystem theory is robust enough to analyze non-technological ecosystems, provided that researchers are equipped to measure relational capital as rigorously as physical or intellectual capital.

The Ontological Shift: Resource Multidimensionality

The most significant theoretical challenge identified by this study concerns how the conceptualization of value translates into qualitative inquiry. To operationalize the framework by Gueler and Schneider in a qualitative setting, this study necessitated a strict deductive coding approach. However, applying this rigid theoretical structure to a highly relational, human-capital ecosystem created an inherent analytical constraint. Specifically, it forces multidimensional resources into mutually exclusive silos, compelling the researcher to code a resource strictly as either a value contribution, a bottleneck, or a reputational asset.

As detailed in the earlier methodological rationale, analytical memos were employed to capture this theoretical friction. Because the qualitative data revealed that almost every resource exhibited secondary linkages across multiple dimensions, attempting to code every overlap would have exponentially increased complexity and diluted the primary objective of the study. Consequently, the analysis prioritized structural clarity by maintaining singular primary codes, while deliberately providing one highly illustrative memo per dimension in the results. This strategy formally documents the multidimensionality of resources without overwhelming the data.

These memo insights provide clear empirical evidence that, in practice, resources within this ecosystem actively resist singular theoretical categorization. For instance, the academy badge was deductively coded primarily as a reputational signal utilized to attract talent. Yet, even from the unilateral perspective of the club, the analysis demonstrates that this same asset simultaneously functions as a scarcity bottleneck by granting exclusive access to elite European tournaments, and as a complementarity multiplier by acting as a magnet for external sponsorships. When evaluated through a multilateral lens, this multidimensional utility expands even further. The reputational capital of the club badge actively amplifies the

operational capacity of partnering agents, significantly enhancing their ability to sign emerging players and negotiate advantageous transfers with competing organizations.

Therefore, this study contributes to the theoretical argument that in non-hierarchical ecosystems, resources possess multidimensional, multiplicative value. While the siloed deductive approach was methodologically necessary to establish a foundational empirical baseline, the findings illustrate that future iterations of the integrated framework must evolve to accommodate this dynamism. To operationalize this evolution, this thesis proposes three distinct methodological avenues for future scholarship, spanning quantitative, mixed-method, and qualitative traditions.

The first avenue entails a quantitative trajectory focused on expanding the measurement architecture of ecosystem value. Future research should seek to transition from traditional linear scales to a multidimensional quantitative matrix. Scholars working within this trajectory would develop measurement instruments that allow a single resource or capability to be scored concurrently across the dimensions of contribution, scarcity, complementarity, and reputation. This advancement would provide a precise, continuous quantitative validation of resource multidimensionality, moving past the static constraints of mutually exclusive classification.

The second and perhaps most vital avenue involves a configured mixed-method approach designed to capture the structural multiplier effects within the ecosystem. Future scholars should employ a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis to model how different combinations of the four dimensions interact to generate overall resource value and appropriation potential. Because fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis is rooted in set-theoretic logic, it is uniquely equipped to identify configuration patterns and causal complexity. This methodology would allow researchers to systematically unearth the hidden mechanisms that affect resource valuation, revealing how a high reputation score might multiply the strategic weight of a minor value contribution or mitigate a lack of bottleneck scarcity.

The third avenue offers a purely qualitative trajectory aimed at deeply investigating the temporal and processual mechanics of resource integration. Future studies could utilize process tracing to explore exactly how and why resource value multiplies across dimensions during real-time stakeholder negotiations. By tracking the chronological lifecycle of specific strategic assets, such as the introduction of an advanced data analytics platform or a major regulatory policy shift, researchers can uncover the step-by-step causal links that transform an isolated input into a multidimensional ecosystem capability. Together, these three methodological avenues provide a comprehensive framework for future research to capture the fluid, multiplicative essence of strategic value within complex ecosystems.

Operationalizing Multilateral Power Mapping

Finally, this study challenges the methodological application of resource valuation in ecosystems. The original measurement model by Gueler and Schneider was designed from a unilateral perspective, relying on a focal actor to evaluate their own input and negotiating power. As noted in the limitations of recent sports ecosystem research, such as the work of Segovia in 2023, relying on a unilateral lens restricts the capacity to measure true ecosystem dynamics, which are by definition multilateral.

This study extends the practical application of the framework by operationalizing a multilateral approach. By triangulating the perspectives of regulatory bodies, clubs, agents, and sponsors, the findings reveal that strategic value cannot be accurately assessed in isolation. An agent's value contribution of individualized welfare support only exists because of a club's limitation regarding scale-driven team environments. Furthermore, a sponsor's complementary value of financial relief is directly dictated by a regulatory constraint, namely the fifty-one percent rule.

By mapping these interdependencies, this thesis proves that strategic value in an ecosystem is an active, co-created dynamic rather than a statically possessed asset. It provides a methodological blueprint for future researchers to analyze how power and value flow between competing and cooperating actors. This approach successfully overcomes the focal-firm bias that constrained the analytical precision of the original quantitative model developed by Gueler and Schneider.

7. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer direct strategic guidance for the actors navigating the highly interdependent Swedish youth football ecosystem. By understanding that competitive advantage stems from relational alignment rather than isolated resources, stakeholders can optimize their positioning and value appropriation strategies. To achieve this, actors must deliberately adopt a multilateral lens. This requires abandoning the traditional firm-centric mindset that evaluates internal capabilities in isolation. Instead, stakeholders must continuously map how their specific resources intersect with the operational deficits, regulatory constraints, and strategic objectives of their ecosystem partners. True multilateral awareness dictates that an actor cannot accurately leverage or price their own value without first understanding the interdependencies that govern the entire network.

For clubs, the findings underscore the necessity of treating the club brand as a multidimensional strategic asset rather than merely a symbol of historical success. The academy badge dictates access to elite international networks and acts as a powerful magnet for external sponsorships. Clubs should actively leverage this reputational capital in negotiations to secure better financial and operational terms, recognizing through a multilateral lens that their brand successfully solves visibility and credibility bottlenecks for external partners. Furthermore, given the financial constraints imposed by the fifty-one percent rule, clubs must recognize that community trust, local embeddedness, and transparent communication are not just social responsibilities, but their primary competitive advantages in a restricted market.

For player agents, who frequently operate in a climate of institutional skepticism, the results provide a blueprint for legitimizing their role. Agents must explicitly position and communicate their value as holistic welfare providers and institutional bridges, moving away from the narrow perception of being simple contract negotiators. By combining their elite experiential capital with advanced analytical investments, agents can prove that they offer a layer of individualized, long-term support that clubs simply lack the capacity to provide at scale. Operating through a multilateral lens allows agents to justify their value appropriation by demonstrating their absolute complementarity to the structural limitations of the broader ecosystem.

For sponsors, the research indicates that maximum strategic impact is achieved by transitioning from transactional financial support to integrated community partnerships. Sponsors who invest time and hands-on operational assistance achieve a level of authenticity, local visibility, and stakeholder trust that standard monetary donations cannot replicate. By aligning their contributions directly with the daily operational bottlenecks of the club, sponsors shift their strategic focus from unilateral brand exposure to multilateral problem solving. This proactive alignment elevates their status from replaceable financiers to indispensable ecosystem partners.

Finally, for regulatory bodies such as the Swedish Football Association, this study highlights the profound market-shaping power of governance frameworks. Regulators must recognize that every policy adjustment directly alters the incentive structures of the entire ecosystem. While frameworks prioritizing child welfare successfully build systemic resilience, financial mechanisms like the education compensation model require continuous calibration. Policymakers must ensure that resource distribution rules do not inadvertently create structural imbalances that disincentivize smaller or lower-tier academies from continuing to invest in youth development. Applying a multilateral lens is essential for drafting regulations that anticipate network-wide reactions, thereby fostering collaborative growth rather than internal friction.

8. Limitations and Future Research

While this study successfully establishes a foundational empirical layer of the Swedish youth football academy ecosystem, several boundaries to the research design must be acknowledged. First, the ecosystem scope was intentionally delimited to capture the most established, first-order actors, specifically clubs, agents, sponsors, and regulatory bodies. While this prioritization was necessary to maintain analytical depth, future research should expand the scope to include peripheral or rapidly emerging actors, such as independent data analytics firms, digital content creators, and media platforms.

Second, the sampling strategy specifically targeted elite actors, focusing on market-leading agents and clubs with senior teams competing in the top national tiers. The negotiation of value, particularly regarding financial scarcity and reputational leverage, may manifest differently at grassroots or lower-tier academy levels. Future studies should investigate whether these multidimensional interdependencies hold true for non-elite organizations operating with significantly fewer resources.

Third, the findings are deeply embedded in the specific institutional context of Swedish sports. The unique regulatory environment, particularly the fifty-one percent rule, fundamentally shapes the scarcity of resources and the nature of value appropriation in ways that may not translate to other markets. Future research should apply this integrated framework to youth football ecosystems in different national contexts, such as those permitting full private ownership, to compare how the absence of such regulatory bottlenecks shifts the balance of power among stakeholders.

Fourth, while the qualitative approach successfully captured the mechanistic dynamism of the ecosystem, the data remains cross-sectional. Value negotiation and relational capital are

built over years, often shifting in response to macroeconomic changes or new regulatory mandates. Longitudinal studies would be highly valuable in tracking how the strategic weight of specific resources, such as an agency's reputation or a club's technological infrastructure, evolves over time as the ecosystem matures.

Finally, the most critical limitation of the applied theoretical framework is its structural inability to quantify resource multidimensionality. As argued in the theoretical contributions, the deductive application of the current model forces multidimensional assets into singular, mutually exclusive categories. This study relied on qualitative analytical memos to document how resources actively intersect across the dimensions of contribution, scarcity, complementarity, and reputation. However, a qualitative mapping is only the first step. The primary call for future research is the methodological development of a multidimensional matrix tool. Future scholars must upgrade the original measurement scale to allow resources to be evaluated simultaneously across all four dimensions, thereby providing a precise, dynamic measurement of how value is multiplicatively co-created and leveraged in complex human-capital ecosystems.

9. Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate how foundational actors negotiate value contribution and value appropriation within the rapidly commercializing ecosystem of Swedish youth football academies. By qualitatively applying Gueler and Schneider's integrated resource-based ecosystem framework, this study successfully established a foundational empirical layer that maps the complex, multilateral interdependencies driving this market.

The empirical findings demonstrate that competitive advantage within Swedish youth football is not achieved through the isolated ownership of tangible assets, but through continuous, relationship-driven alignment. Clubs serve as the primary engines of value creation, leveraging structured training environments and community ties. Agents operate as essential connective tissue, bridging institutional boundaries to provide highly individualized player welfare and career support. Sponsors transcend their role as mere financiers by offering deeply embedded, trust-based community backing. Concurrently, regulatory bodies shape the entire landscape, orchestrating collective reputation while imposing structural constraints, such as the fifty-one percent rule, which fundamentally dictate the scarcity of resources and the flow of capital. Collectively, these actors engage in a delicate balance of coopetition, proving that value in this ecosystem is actively negotiated rather than passively held.

Beyond mapping these empirical realities, this thesis makes three distinct theoretical contributions to the strategic management literature. First, it successfully tests the boundary conditions of the integrated ecosystem framework by shifting its application from traditional technology and manufacturing industries to a highly relational, human-capital-centric environment. Second, by adopting a multilateral research design, it overcomes the unilateral measurement bias that constrained the analytical precision of Gueler and Schneider's original quantitative model. offering a blueprint for mapping power dynamics across diverse, interdependent stakeholder groups.

Most importantly, this study challenges the ontological foundation of how resource value is measured. While the deductive application of the original framework was methodologically necessary to establish a baseline, the qualitative findings prove that human-capital resources refuse to exist in mutually exclusive silos. Assets such as a club brand possess multiplicative value through multidimensionality and multilateral considerations, Therefore, this thesis concludes that in non-hierarchical ecosystems, value is not a static noun to be captured in a single dimension, but a dynamic, multidimensional verb.

Ultimately, as the Swedish youth football ecosystem continues to commercialize and attract new digital and analytical entrants, the actors who will thrive are those who recognize this relational complexity. Sustained competitive advantage will belong to the stakeholders who can seamlessly align their unique resources with the needs of the broader network, proving that in the modern sports ecosystem, collaboration is the ultimate strategic resource.

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11. Appendix

Figure 1

Gueler & Schneider's official framework

Table 1

Items for Ecosystem Input's Value.

	Contribution to Value Proposition
1_1	The performance of the ecosystem is inhibited without my input.
1_2	My input is important for the fulfillment of the value proposition.
1_3	My input possesses an important component for the functioning of the ecosystem.
Scarcity (Bottleneck Input)	
2_1	My input is valuable and in the short-term not imitable.
2_2	There are no substitutes to my valuable input.
2_3	My input is not replaceable in the ecosystem.
2_4	I alone can offer this valuable input to the ecosystem.
Complementarity	
3_1	My input is complementing the existing resources (offering) in the ecosystem.
3_2	The value of my input increases in the presence of other resources in the ecosystem.
3_3	My input and the input of other actors are to a certain extent adjusted to one another.
3_4	Consuming the inputs together results in a higher benefit, then consuming them individually.
Reputation of the Input Provider	
4_1	Consumers are satisfied with the performance of my input.
4_2	My input is renowned for its high reliability.
4_3	The quality of my input exhibits a high degree of continuity.
4_4	My input means a gain of positive image for the ecosystem.

Figure 2

Type of dimension	Interview Guide for Club Representatives
Contribution to Value Proposition	In what ways does your academy's training and development contribute to the overall success of Swedish football?
	What operational objectives does your academy have (Certification System any influence)?
	How does your academy fulfill those objectives?
	What unique qualities or methods does your academy implement that differentiate it from others in Sweden?
Scarcity (Bottleneck input)	What are the core competencies or specialized resources within your academy that make it difficult for other academies to replicate your success?
	Do you believe your academy provides a training model that cannot be substituted or easily replaced? If so, why?

	How do you ensure that your academy remains an essential part of the club's talent pipeline in the long term?
	Are there any exclusive partnerships, training methodologies, or scouting networks that give your academy a competitive advantage over others?
Complementarity	How does your academy interact with the first team and other clubs in terms of player development and progression?
	How do you collaborate with internal stakeholders (coaches, parents, community (51%), and commercial investors) to ensure the best possible development for young players?
	How do you collaborate with external stakeholders (agents, scouts, media, other clubs/academies, schools, sponsors and regulatory institutions (RF, SvFF and SEF)) to ensure the best possible development for young players.
	Do you feel that any actor within the ecosystem captures more value than they contribute? Conversely, are there actors who contribute significantly but do not receive enough recognition or resources?
Reputation of the input provider	How would you describe the perception of your academy within the ecosystem?
	What internal steps do you take to ensure your academy maintains this reputation?
	What external factors contribute to ensuring your academy maintains this reputation?
	Can you provide examples of specific opportunities that your academy has gained due to its reputation?

Figure 3

Type of dimension	Interview Guide for Agents
Contribution to Value Proposition	In what ways does your agency contribute to the overall success of Swedish football?
	What operational objectives does your agency have?
	How does your agency fulfil these objectives?
Scarcity (Bottleneck input)	What core competencies or specialised resources within your agency make it difficult for other agencies to replicate your success?
	Do you believe your agency offers a business model that cannot be replaced or easily substituted? If yes, why?
	Are there any exclusive partnerships, operational strategies, or scouting systems that give your agency a competitive advantage over others?
Complementarity	How does your agency interact with clubs regarding player development?
	How do you collaborate with parents to ensure the best possible development for players?
	How do you collaborate with external stakeholders (agents, scouts, media, other clubs/academies, schools, sponsors, and regulatory institutions such as RF, SvFF, and SEF)?

	Do you feel that any actor within the ecosystem captures more value than they contribute? Conversely, are there actors who contribute significantly but do not receive enough recognition or resources?
Reputation of the input provider	How would you describe your agency's brand image within the ecosystem?
	What internal measures do you take to ensure that the agency maintains its reputation? (e.g., culture, objectives, specialised resources)
	What external factors contribute to the agency maintaining its reputation? (e.g., media strategy, brand awareness, other brand strategies)
	Can you provide examples of specific opportunities your agency has gained thanks to its reputation? (e.g., increased funding, stronger partnerships, higher player retention, more external offers)

Figure 4

Type of dimension	Interview Guide for Sponsors
Contribution to Value Proposition	What motivated your organization to sponsor a football club or academy?
	In your view, how does your sponsorship contribute to the growth or success of the club/academy?
	Do you believe your sponsorship has a positive impact beyond branding—e.g., on youth development, community engagement, or long-term strategic goals?
Scarcity (Bottleneck input)	What makes your sponsorship offer unique compared to other sponsors or funding opportunities available to the club?
	Do you feel your brand brings something irreplaceable or hard to substitute to the ecosystem?
	Have you observed other actors trying to provide similar sponsorship value, and how do you think your contribution stands out?
Complementarity	How does your sponsorship align with or amplify the efforts of other stakeholders, such as the club, football community, agents, parents and regulatory institutions?
	Do you engage in any joint initiatives with the club or academy that go beyond financial contribution?
	Do you feel that the ecosystem is structured in a way that allows your contribution to be fully leveraged?
	Are there cases where your sponsorship complements other inputs from other stakeholders to create greater impact together?
	What could clubs or academies do better to maximize mutual value from sponsorships?
Reputation of the	How do you believe your brand is perceived within the ecosystem?

input provider	
	What internal measures are taken to ensure that the brand maintains its reputation as a sponsor? (e.g., corporate culture, objectives, specialised resources)
	What external factors contribute to your brand maintaining its reputation as a sponsor? (e.g., media strategy, other brand strategies)
	Has your sponsorship helped enhance your brand's image?

Figure 5

Stakeholder/Nr.	Interview Format	Recording/Transcriptions
Club/1	Digital/Phone	Y/Y
Club/2	Digital/Phone	Y/Y
Club/3	Digital/Phone	Y/Y
Agent/1	Digital/Phone	Y/Y
Agent/2	Digital/Phone	Y/Y
Sponsor/1	Physical	N/Y
Sponsor/2	Digital/Phone	N/Y

Figure 6

Observation	Sources
SvFF Sustainability Model	https://svff.svenskfotboll.se/4a8ea6/globalassets/svff/bilderblock/arkiv/2023/2310/svff_sustainability_strategy_23_10_13.pdf
51% Rule (Member majority ownership)	https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/medlemsagda-foreningar_ha1028/
FIFA Football Agent License System (2023)	https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/1e7b741fa0fae779/original/FIFA-Football-Agent-Regulations.pdf
Reputation Responsibility for General Football	https://www.svenskelitfotboll.se/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Stadgar-20220318.pdf & https://svff.svenskfotboll.se/4a8ea6/globalassets/svff/bilderblock/arkiv/2023/2310/svff_sustainability_strategy_23_10_13.pdf

Figure 7

Policy	Dimension	Value	Institution
Sustainability Model	Contribution to Value Proposition	Grow ecosystem base through mass participation	SvFF

		and social values	
51% Rule	Scarcity	Ensures democratic governance, long-term sustainability, and community orientation	RF
FIFA Football Agent License System (2023)	Complementarity	Ensures agents are certified, legal compliance in transfers	FIFA
Ecosystem Reputation Responsibility	Reputation	Brand-responsible by promoting through initiatives domestically and internationally	SvFF & SEF

AI Disclosure

Interview data from the recorded interviews were transcribed using transcription software. Before being provided to a large language model (LLM), the transcripts were anonymised using participant labels and were processed separately for each participant. The LLM was provided with relevant contextual information about the study and its theoretical framework. It was then asked to produce preliminary bullet-point summaries of the interview material and organise them according to the four dimensions of the framework: contribution to the value proposition, scarcity, complementarity, and reputation. This served as initial coding support rather than as a substitute for the author's analysis. For the sponsor interviews, which were not recorded, the author manually summarised and coded the interview material directly from his notes.

To maintain author control, every AI-generated bullet point was reviewed against the corresponding transcript and the author's first-hand understanding of the interviews, which he personally conducted. Particular attention was given to statements that could reasonably fit within more than one theoretical dimension. In such cases, the author determined the most appropriate primary classification based on the original context and intended meaning of the participant's response. As a supplementary check, the LLM was occasionally used to flag possible inconsistencies between the proposed classifications, the theoretical framework, and the underlying interview or policy material.

The LLM further assisted with the formulation of interview questions and with refining the clarity, structure, and coherence of sentences in the results and discussion sections. This improved the readability and organisation of the thesis. However, its involvement may also have influenced which patterns appeared most salient, how evidence was grouped, and how parts of the analysis were presented. Potential risks might therefore include misclassification, loss of nuance, standardised phrasing, and overly confident formulations. To mitigate these risks and maintain author control, all LLM-supported classifications and formulations were reviewed against the original material and revised or rejected where necessary. The author retained final authority over coding, evidence selection, interpretation, argumentation, and conclusions, and accepts full responsibility for the contents of the thesis.