



MANAGING THE COOPETITION PARADOX

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Abstract

This research focuses on the study of the coopetition paradox. Companies adopt "paradoxical", "complex", and "counter-intuitive" relationships of both cooperation and competition, defined as coopetition relationships, to cope with the complexity of the economic environment and institutional pressures, to create and share resources and skills, and possibly to innovate. Nevertheless, in the absence of a specific management mechanism, coopetition strategies are often considered risky and a source of tension. These tensions arise from the paradoxical and counter-intuitive nature of these strategies. A specific coopetitive paradox device is essential for firms engaged in these types of arrangements, in order to manage risks and coopetitive tensions, and to avoid unexpected outcomes. This research offers theoretical insights into the paradoxical nature of coopetition strategies, based on a synthetic review of the literature. Finally, our analysis proposes a framework for analyzing the coopetitive paradox, grounded in contradictions.

Keywords: Competition, cooperation, coopetition, tensions, paradox

INTRODUCTION

A neologism resulting from two contradictory and antagonistic modes of strategic interaction, competition and cooperation, coopetition is presented as the most advantageous mode of relational interaction for companies. Firms engaged in a strategy of coopetition can simultaneously combine the advantages of competition and the advantages of cooperation (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). Competition encourages companies to introduce new production combinations, to innovate and to improve their product-service. Similarly, cooperation gives companies access to resources, skills, knowledge, and technologies. Coopetition is therefore a strategy that creates and appropriates value (Hani and Dagnino, 2020).

Nevertheless, coopetition could be a strategy that carries risks and generates tensions (Fernandez et al. 2014, 2018). The main risk associated with this strategy is also the opportunistic behaviour of cooperating players (Fernandez et al. 2014). Cooperating players try to maximise their own interests and personal objectives by combining resources and skills that are shared collectively. Tensions arise from the "paradoxical" and "counter-intuitive" nature of this strategy, which simultaneously involves two contradictory and opposing modes of relational interaction: competition and cooperation. In the absence of a clear management mechanism, coopetition can lead to undesirable and unexpected results (Czackon et al. 2016).

To manage these cooperative tensions, some authors recognise the importance of a specific system for managing the cooperative paradox (Fernandez et al. 2018). In the literature, three principles of coopetitive paradox management have been identified: the principle of functional separation of competitive and cooperative activities (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000), the principle of individual integration of the coopetitive paradox (Chen, 2008) and the principle of co-management of joint activities (Fernandez et al. 2014).

In this research, we examine the paradoxical nature of coopetition strategies. Based on a conceptual analysis of the coopetition corpus, we propose a framework for analysing coopetition based on contradictions.

The coopetition concept: a simultaneous relationship of cooperation and competition

Coopetition was introduced into the social sciences in 1973 (Deutsch, 1973). It first appeared in the professional press in the early 1980s. However, the concept emerged in management science in the early nineties. Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) best know it through the famous work. Since then, academic work on the concept of coopetition has multiplied and touched on the various disciplines in management sciences. Since then, coopetition has appeared in work in finance (Carfi, 2009; Carfi and Musolino, 2012, 2014),

marketing (Hunt, 1997; Palmer, 2000), logistics (Wheatley, 1998; Song and Lee, 2012) and strategy (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Gulati, 1998; Gnyawali and Madhavan, 2001).

A neologism resulting from two contradictory and antagonistic modes of strategic interaction, competition and cooperation, coopetition presents itself as the most advantageous mode of relational interaction for the actors (Le Roy and Sanou, 2014). Since the initial formulation of the coopetition phenomenon by Brandenburger and Nalebuff, (1996), authors have established a direct link between this relational mode and the creation and appropriation of value. Coopetition is therefore a strategy that creates and appropriates value (Czaron et al. 2016) for all the players involved. In this way, cooperating players benefit simultaneously from the advantages of competition and cooperation (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000).

Coopetition strategies are considered to be among the most beneficial and advantageous strategic options for players. By adopting this strategy, players can benefit simultaneously from the advantages of competition and the advantages of cooperation (Lado et al. 1997; Le Roy and Sonou, 2014; Le Roy and Fernandez, 2015).

The competitive aspect of the relationship assumes that actors in an industry or sector of activity try to maximise their own interests. This logic is essentially based on neo-classical economic theories. Conversely, the cooperative aspect of the relationship assumes that the partner players work together to achieve a common collective objective. This logic is inspired by work in the sociology of organisations. Actors adopt cooperative strategies to deal with the complexity of the economic environment (Bonel and Rocco, 2007) and institutional pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), to create and share resources and skills (Quintana-Garcia and Beravides-Valesco, 2004), to innovate (Le Roy et al. 2016; Chiambaretto et al. 2020) and eventually to create value (Czaron et al, 2016; Bouncken et al. 2020; Hani and Dagnino, 2020).

In the literature, three main levels of determinants have been identified: industry or sector-level determinants, organisational determinants and individual determinants (Ben Amara and Bahri, 2024).

At the level of the industry, structures (Bonel and Rocco, 2007; Okura, 2007) influence the strategic behaviour of players (Porter, 1980, 1982) and the structure of the market guides behaviour towards competition or cooperation or even towards both relational modes at the same time. The nature of the industry (or sector of activity) and its specific features are a determining factor in the emergence of cooperative relationships. The economic context (Tidstrom and Ahman, 2006), hyper-competition (D'Aveni, 1995) and institutional pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995) encourage rival players to cooperate together in order to fight against a third player in the industry or in a market (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000) or at the same time to survive in a period of economic decline (Tidstrom and Ahman, 2006).

Organisational determinants can also give rise to the emergence and development of competition strategies between players. Through a strategy of coopetition, players seek to simultaneously combine the advantages of cooperation and the advantages of competition (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000; Gulati, 1998) in a win-win situation (Axelrod, 1984). The pooling, exploration and sharing of resources and skills between rival partners (Quintana-Garcia and Beravides-Valesco, 2004) are considered to be determining factors in the emergence of competition strategies. The acquisition of knowledge and skills, organisational learning and the development of dynamic capabilities can encourage players to adopt coopetition strategies.

The literature on coopetition also highlights individual dimensions as explanatory elements of competition strategies (Czakon et al. 2020). The adoption of a competition strategy depends largely on the affective, perceptual and cognitive dimensions of the players (Ingram and Yue, 2008). The adoption of a competition strategy can be linked to the individual's cooperative orientation (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007) to his or her past experience(s) of collaborating with competitors (Gnyawali et al. 2016), but also to trust in competitors (Quintana-Garcia and Beravides-Valesco, 2004).

Available theoretical models have been proposed in the literature to understand the emergence and development of competition strategies between actors: the syncretic model of Lado et al. (1997), the network model of Bengtsson and Kock, (2000) and the integrative model of Gnyawali and Park, (2009).

Coopetition: a paradoxical strategy at first sight

In the social sciences, Cameron and Quinn (1988) defined the notion of paradox as an apparent contradiction, a state in which antagonistic, contradictory and opposing elements occur at the same time. Later, Lewis, (2000) defined the concept of paradox as "*contradictory but interdependent elements - elements that seem logical in isolation but are absurd and irrational when they occur simultaneously*" (Lewis, 2000: 760). From a more global perspective Smith and Lewis, (2011) proposed a clearer and more precise definition of the concept of paradox. They defined the concept as "*contradictory but interdependent elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time*" (Smith and Lewis, 2011).

In management science, the paradox approach has interested many researchers in examining the notion in several areas, such as, identity (Fiol et al. 2009), innovation (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009), change (Farjoun, 2010), leadership (Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007), governance (Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003) and possibly in strategy, particularly competition strategies (Fernandez et al. 2015).

It is true that coopetition strategies are considered among the most beneficial and advantageous strategic options for companies. By adopting this strategy, companies will be able to benefit simultaneously from the advantages of competition and the advantages of cooperation (Chiambaretto and Dumez, 2016). Consequently, coopetition is presented as a strategic development option for companies (Gnyawali and Park, 2011).

In this spirit, coopetition strategies are born from the principle of their apparent extremes and opposition: cooperation and competition are seen as two modes of interaction and are presented as two opposing extremes on a single continuum or on two separate continuums (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). In this case, the co-operative relationship is perceived as complex and paradoxical (Chen, 2008).

The 'complex' and 'paradoxical' nature of the relationship stems from two opposing interaction logics: competition and cooperation.

The competitive aspect of the relationship assumes that the players (firms) in an industry or sector of activity are trying to maximise their own interests. This logic is essentially based on the principle derived from neo-classical economic theories. Conversely, the cooperative aspect of the relationship assumes that the partner players work together to achieve a common collective objective. This logic is largely inspired by the work of organisational sociology.

Between these two opposing interaction logics (competition and cooperation), which are based on two different theoretical currents (neo-classical economic theories for competition and sociological theories of organisations for cooperation), the 'paradoxical' nature (Chen, 2008) of coopetition emerges.

Coopetition: a risky strategy and source of tension

Coopetition is defined as the simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and competition between firms (Gnyawali and Park, 2011). It is considered to be one of the riskiest modes of interaction and the most likely to generate tensions between cooperating partners (Fernandez et al. 2014, 2018).

Often considered to be among the most advantageous and value-creating strategies (Bouncken et al. 2020), coopetition strategies are also considered to be among the riskiest strategies and to generate tensions between the partners involved (Walley, 2007; Chen, 2008; Gnyawali and Park, 2011; Fernandez et al. 2014, 2018). The tensions stem from the 'paradoxical' nature of this strategy (Raza-Ullah, 2020) and can lead to unexpected results (Granata et al. 2017), hinder the success of a coopetition strategy (Ritala, 2012), or even cause it to fail (Pellegrin-Boucher et al. 2017). Players involved in a coopetition strategy may be exposed to several risks (Pellegrin-Boucher et al. 2013). The risks stem mainly from

opportunistic behaviour on the part of cooperating players (Fernandez et al. 2014), but also from the risk of plundering skills, knowledge and expertise.

Coopetition strategies, by their very nature, involve contradictory, antagonistic and opposing modes of interaction and cooperative tensions arise from the combination of these two opposing modes of interaction between opposing partners, which are competition and cooperation. However, companies involved in a coopetition strategy may be exposed to a number of risks (Pellegrin and Boucher et al. 2013). The risks stem mainly from opportunistic behaviour on the part of cooperating players (Fernandez et al. 2014), but also from the risk of plundering skills, knowledge, expertise and technologies (Le Roy et al. 2013).

The perception of these risks by cooperating actors could generate tensions. The study by Fernandez et al. (2014) highlighted different sources of cooperative tensions at three levels: inter-organisational, intra-organisational and inter-individual.

The sources of these tensions are linked to the fact of combining two antagonistic and opposing dimensions, competition and cooperation (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). In a way, this is the "coopetitive paradox". These tensions are influenced by the dilemma of creating shared benefits and appropriating private benefits (Golnam et al. 2014). In some cases, these cooperative tensions can reduce the performance of the companies involved (Le Roy and Sanou, 2014), hinder the success of a co-opetition strategy (Ritala, 2012), or even cause it to fail (Bounchen and Fredrich, 2016).

For this reason, a specific system for managing cooperative tensions is essential; in order to better manage the risks associated with this strategy, particularly the risk of opportunistic behaviour on the part of cooperating players (Fernandez and Le Roy, 2013).

Managing the coopetition paradox: a specific system?

To manage these tensions, authors recognise the importance of a specific system for managing cooperative tensions (Fernandez et al. 2014, 2018; Le Roy and Fernandez, 2015). In this case, a specific tension management system is essential, to better manage the cooperative tensions that emerge between the players involved, but also to reduce the risks associated with a cooperative strategy, in particular the opportunistic behaviour of the cooperating players (Pellegrin-Boucher, 2013), as well as the benefits derived from the partnership relationship (Le Roy, 2003). This specific management system can guarantee the success of a coopetition strategy (Le Roy et al. 2016). In the literature, three principles for managing cooperative tensions have been identified: the principle of functional separation of competitive and cooperative activities (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000), the principle of individual integration of

cooperative tensions (Chen, 2008) and the principle of co-management of joint activities (Fernandez et al. 2014, 2018).

Regarding the management of cooperative tensions by the separation principle, the literature suggests several managerial practices and devices. A first practice consists of cooperating on certain activities or links in the value chain while remaining in rivalry on others (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). In this case, the coopetition management system focuses mainly on the activity or function shared by the allied partners. A second practice consists of cooperating on certain products or markets and competing on other products or markets. In this case, the coopetition management system focuses on the product/market pair (Fernandez et al. 2014). A third practice consists of involving a third-party actor or third-party intermediary to manage the activities shared between cooperating partners. This actor-intermediary could be a customer (Depeyre and Dumez, 2007), a public player (Fernandez et al. 2014) or an association (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000).

Regarding the management of cooperative tensions through the principle of individual integration, for some defenders of this principle (Chen, 2008), cooperative tensions should be collectively integrated and known by the allied actors. Bringing together several individuals or entrepreneurs from different sectors to work together could be defined or even misunderstood by the individuals involved, which could generate tensions. To avoid these cases, entrepreneurs should be aware of the 'paradox' and understand the reasons why they have chosen to cooperate with their adversary partners, but they must also be aware of their roles in a coopetition strategy (Chen, 2008; Fernandez et al. 2014). Coopetition strategies can only be successful if the individuals involved in shared or common activities have deeply integrated the 'paradoxical' logic of this strategy.

A third principle of managing cooperative tensions is to simultaneously manage activities shared by allied adversaries. This principle (co-management of shared activities) embodies both the principles of separation and integration. Authors recognise the importance of the co-management principle of the cooperative paradox (Fernandez et al. 2014; Le Roy and Fernandez, 2015). The two principles, integration, and separation are rather complementary: each of the principles of the management of coopetition, has its own advantages and interests and the combination of these two principles, in the context of the management of shared activities between allied competitors make it possible to compensate for the shortcomings of the other. The management of coopetition by the principle of separation would seem to be relevant at the organisational and supra-organisational level. The management of coopetition by the principle of integration seems relevant at the individual level. By combining these two principles,

as part of a coopetition strategy, co-management of coopetition (separation and integration) would seem to be the most relevant at the level of project teams (Le Roy and Fernandez, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This research examines the management of the coopetition paradox. By its very nature, coopetition involves two contradictory and antagonistic modes of strategic interaction: competition and cooperation. Often considered among the most advantageous and value-creating strategies for companies, it is now emerging as one of the riskiest and most dangerous strategies for the players involved in this type of strategic arrangement. These strategic tensions stem from the paradoxical and counter-intuitive nature of this strategy. These cooperative tensions may, without a doubt, lead to unexpected results, or they may contribute to the failure of a cooperative strategy. In such cases, a specific coopetition management system is essential in order to better manage the tensions that will emerge between the actors involved, but also to reduce the risks associated with a coopetition strategy, notably the opportunistic behavior of cooperative actors. This management system can guarantee the success of a coopetition strategy. Based on a literature review, our conceptual framing identified three principles of coopetition paradox management: the principle of functional separation, the principle of individual paradox integration, and the principle of coopetition co-management. However, our conceptual framing is not without limitations. One of the main limitations of our research refers to its theoretical and conceptual character.

To build on these findings, future research could focus on exploring practical management tools for implementing the identified principles of coopetition paradox management. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of these principles in various industries and geographic contexts would offer valuable insights. Further studies could also examine how different organizational cultures and structures impact the success or failure of coopetition strategies, as well as explore the role of digital platforms in facilitating or hindering coopetition in an increasingly connected world.

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