



Coopetition and COVID-19: Collaborative business-to-business marketing strategies in a pandemic crisis



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ABSTRACT

Although coopetition (simultaneous cooperation and competition) should positively affect company performance, it is unclear how implementation of these business-to-business marketing strategies can take place during large-scale emergencies. Therefore, guided by resource-based theory and the relational view, this investigation examines how organisations have used coopetition to cope with the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Key examples include retailers sharing information about stock levels, pharmaceutical organisations working together to develop a vaccine, technological giants collaborating for the greater good, and charities forming alliances for a joint cause. This paper strengthens the extant literature by highlighting the heterogeneity of coopetition strategies that firms can use within a global crisis. Practitioners must balance the risks and rewards of coopetition activities. In turn, they should decide whether to continue to cooperate with their competitors once the pandemic has ended, or resume operating under individualistic business models. This article ends with some future research directions.

1. Introduction

“The basic aim of collaboration is to pursue goals collaboratively that otherwise would be difficult to pursue” (Di Benedetto, Lindgreen, Storgaard, & Clarke, 2019, p. 1).

While the health-related shocks associated with the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) are well known, the disease has caused commerce to change in unprecedented ways (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). Most employees are working from home (instructed by policy-makers to self-isolate), demand for home deliveries has risen substantially, restaurants and many other establishments have closed their doors to the public, and business failure rates have increased exponentially (Washington Post, 2020). That said however, certain sectors are performing better in comparison to others, such as food and beverage retailers that have served as substitutes for the now-closed bars and restaurants (MSN, 2020). Various recommendations exist for preparing a business for a post-pandemic world, including open innovation and horizon planning (Chesbrough, 2020; Lund Pedersen & Ritter, 2020). For example, Ritter and Lund Pedersen (2020) noted the importance of decision-makers reviewing their business models, focusing on custo-

mers, value propositions, value demonstrations, and capabilities, together with the connections between these issues. They add that decision-makers need to define realistic objectives for their organisations, during and after the crisis. In fact, a number of firms (e.g., Coca-Cola, Chevron, and Ford) have changed their business models, through producing aspects of personal protective equipment (as opposed to their normal products) to contribute to the global effort to fight COVID-19 (Fortune, 2020).

Another noticeable way that firms have changed their business models is through the amount of cooperation between competing organisations (coopetition) that has occurred because the COVID-19 outbreak has had such a profound effect on the world economy (Independent, 2020; The Guardian, 2020). Indeed, even policy-makers have engaged in coopetition activities (e.g., through contact tracing between rival government agencies in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey), given the impact of the pandemic and the need to balance economic and health-related goals (National Post, 2020). Coopetition is defined as “a paradoxical relationship between two or more actors, regardless of whether they are involved in horizontal or vertical relationships, simultaneously involved in cooperative and competitive

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interactions” (Bengtsson & Kock, 2014, p. 180). Coopetition strategies pertain to companies sharing resources (e.g., equipment and funds) and capabilities (e.g., knowledge and experience) for mutually-beneficial outcomes¹ (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Gnyawali, Madhavan, He, & Bengtsson, 2016; Park, Srivastava, & Gnyawali, 2014; Pattinson, Nicholson, & Lindgreen, 2018). In fact, although discussing network relationships more broadly than coopetition, Ritter, Wilkinson, & Johnston (2002) note that an ability to effectively deal with the interactions among network relationships is a core competence of a firm, proceeding to add this has a direct bearing on a firm's competitive strength and performance. Consequently, while there are some drawbacks associated with these inter-firm activities not being managed effectively, ranging from tensions, through to opportunistic behaviours (Crick, Crick, & Chaudhry, 2020; Czakon & Czernek, 2016; Luo, Rindfleisch, & Tse, 2007; Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, & Kock, 2014), a large volume of research surrounds the performance-enhancing benefits of coopetition (Felzensztein, Stringer, Benson-Rea, & Freeman, 2014; Ritala, 2012; Velu, 2016).

To date, a research focus involving the implementation of coopetition activities during times of crisis remains under-researched. Therefore, it is unclear how practitioners within organisations (small and large) can manage the interplay between cooperation and competition to cope with the potentially devastating effects of widespread emergencies (e.g., COVID-19). This is a concern because it is difficult to make recommendations to scholars and practitioners about whether coopetition is (or is not) a performance-driving business-to-business marketing strategy in these volatile circumstances. Specifically, a need exists for research to offer illustrations of the implementation of different forms of coopetition taking place throughout a pandemic crisis, as well as the advantages and disadvantages for the companies involved (together with their customers and other key stakeholders). Collectively, these insights highlight the risks and rewards of cooperating with industry rivals in these extraordinary settings. Hence, guided by resource-based theory and the relational view (Barney, 1991; Dyer, Singh, & Hesterly, 2018; Lavie, 2006), the objective of this paper is to examine how decision-makers can adapt their business models through implementing coopetition strategies during times of crisis (concentrating on COVID-19). By achieving this research objective, three important contributions follow to strengthen the business-to-business marketing literature:

- (1) Insights feature coopetition being a multi-faceted set of firm-level behaviours used to help companies (that otherwise may not collaborate) to operate within a volatile crisis (building upon Pangarkar, 2007; Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016).
- (2) The barriers to engaging in coopetition activities are illustrated to demonstrate how certain political, bureaucratic, and legal forces can hinder organisations from working with industry rivals during a health-related emergency (responding to Neuwirth & Svetlicinii, 2015; Schiavone & Simoni, 2019).

¹ Earlier studies use terms, like inter-firm cooperation and alliances instead of “coopetition” (Cui et al., 2018; Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2003). While coopetition is a business-to-business marketing strategy, earlier investigations highlight that these inter-organisational relationships can have wider outcomes; for example, firms might cooperate with their competitors to create value for their final customers in superior ways, compared to if they utilised their own resources and capabilities (Felzensztein et al., 2018; Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2003). Accordingly, in this current investigation, coopetition is conceptualised as a set of cooperative relationships among rivals that can benefit the competing firms, their customers, and other key stakeholders (building on, for example, Ritter, Wilkinson, & Johnston, 2004; Lacoste, 2012; Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018). Nonetheless, the core business-to-business marketing relationships associated with the coopetition construct remain the focus of this study. The authors thank the Guest Editors for requesting more information on the dynamics of coopetition activities.

- (3) The delicate nature of the coopetition paradox is evaluated to develop a stronger understanding of how firms can collaborate with their competitors throughout (and potentially after) a pandemic crisis (following Luo et al., 2007; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014; Crick, 2019).

To make these three contributions, this article is structured as follows. First, the framing literature regarding coopetition is reviewed. Second, some practitioner-focused news stories are discussed in relation to core issues within the business-to-business marketing literature. These pertain to how certain organisations have pivoted their business models to use coopetition strategies in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Third, some actionable managerial implications and recommendations are outlined. Fourth, several directions for future research are described. Fifth, the paper is concluded.

2. Review of the pertinent literature

2.1. Resource-based theory and the relational view

The resource-based view examines the link between organisations' resources and capabilities and their performance (Barney, 1991). A fundamental assumption of this lens is that larger companies, with a greater volume of resources and capabilities, can typically out-perform smaller-sized firms, with fewer assets at their disposal (Barney, 1991; Nason & Wiklund, 2018). To create a competitive advantage, firms' utilisation of resources and capabilities can manifest in assets that are well organized; also, of value, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Kozlenkova, Samaha, & Palmatier, 2014). Nevertheless, owner-managers' possession of resources and capabilities does not necessarily lead to a competitive advantage; instead, strategic flexibility in decision-making is often important (Priem & Butler, 2001). Consistent with the resources and capabilities – performance-enhancing relationship of resource-based theory, earlier research evidences the benefits of employing coopetition as a business-to-business marketing strategy (Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018; Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018). As an illustration, Rindfleisch & Moorman (2003) highlighted that if organisations collaborate with their competitors (what they referred to as inter-firm cooperation), they can obtain new resources and capabilities (combined with their own assets) to yield higher-levels of performance compared to if they operated under an individualistic business model.

However, although the resource-based view helps explain how these resource and capability-sharing activities positively impact company performance, it inadequately considers the nature of relationships within the coopetition strategies, namely, in terms of which rivals that firms cooperate with and how this takes place (as noted by Crick, 2019). The relational view focuses on how high-quality inter-organisational relationships (potentially including with competitors) can positively affect company performance (Dyer & Singh, 1998). In fact, recent work by Barney (2018) extended the resource-based view to encapsulate a stakeholder dimension, recognising circumstances in which decision-makers should work closely with key partners (e.g., competitors in this current study) to be more successful in their markets. It follows that resource-based theory and the relational view can be integrated to examine the cooperative and competitive aspects of the coopetition construct, including how decision-makers need to work with rivals that are trustworthy for mutually-beneficial outcomes (building on Lavie, 2006; Barney, 2018; Dyer et al., 2018). Henceforth, guiding this current investigation was an infusion of resource-based theory and the relational view to evaluate the implementation of coopetition strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. The origins of the coopetition construct

Coopetition gained some attention among business-to-business marketing scholars in the 1990s, with the emergence of two schools-of-

thought. On the one hand, [Brandenburger & Nalebuff \(1996\)](#) viewed cooptation as being an organisation-wide mind-set pertaining to managers and functional-level employees believing in the importance of cooperating with industry rivals. On the other hand, [Bengtsson and Kock \(1999\)](#) argued that cooptation is a set of firm-level behaviours, whereby, organisations share resources and capabilities with their competitors to improve their performance within their markets. In fact, this latter perspective has led to a continuing interest that involves decision-makers' resource and capability-sharing activities and the relationship with aspects of company performance (see [Bouncken & Kraus, 2013](#); [Crick & Crick, 2019](#); [Hoffmann, Lavie, Reuer, & Shiplov, 2018](#); [Luo et al., 2007](#)). Furthermore, [Bengtsson & Kock \(1999\)](#) did not formally define the cooptation construct; rather, they focused on cooperation with competitors. One year later, [Bengtsson & Kock \(2000\)](#) described cooptation activities as being the interplay between cooperation and competition, in which two rival firms collaborate. Subsequently, they extended their conceptualisations to acknowledge that cooptation can be implemented in horizontal and vertical channels, as well as between multiple rivals (see [Bengtsson & Kock, 2014](#)). This current paper used these developments to explore the heterogeneity of the cooptation construct (horizontal and vertical activities) that apply to a potentially large number of industry rivals (not just two competitors). More specifically, how various forms of cooptation relate to respective practitioners' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3. The cooptation paradox

Although cooptation has evolved as a business-to-business marketing construct over the last twenty-five years ([Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996](#); [Felzensztein et al., 2014](#); [Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018](#); [Lascaux, 2020](#); [Luo, 2007](#); [Luo, Slotegraaf, & Pan, 2006](#)), existing studies largely views this as a paradoxical strategy. Indeed, in their seminal work, [Bengtsson & Kock \(2000\)](#) noted that there can be situations where the degree of cooperation is outweighed by the magnitude of competition within a market (and vice-versa), or these paradoxical forces are equally matched. In other words, in all cooptation partnerships, any collaborative behaviours will interact with some form of rivalrous actions (see [Czakov & Czernek, 2016](#); [Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018](#); [Park et al., 2014](#)). In fact, some researchers have viewed the cooptation construct as a Yin and Yang concept, whereby, if the opposing cooperative and competitive forces are balanced, they are advantageous; for example, if decision-makers work with complementary partners and manage potential tensions ([Gnyawali et al., 2016](#); [Mattsson & Tidstrom, 2015](#); [Raza-Ullah et al., 2014](#)). Alternatively, if these paradoxical forces are unhinged by excessive forms of rivalry, there can be harmful performance outcomes (see [Crick & Crick, 2020](#)).

2.4. Antecedents of cooptation

An emerging body of literature surrounds the antecedents (or drivers) of cooptation strategies. For instance, [Gnyawali & Park \(2011\)](#) used case study data from Sony and Samsung Electronics to explain how larger-sized corporations (as opposed to under-resourced entities) are equipped with the mechanisms to engage in cooptation. They proposed that a critical driver of cooptation strategies is a cooptation-oriented mind-set. In other words, [Gnyawali & Park \(2011\)](#) argued that if managers and functional-level employees believe in the importance of cooperating with their competitors, these values and assumptions should manifest into behavioural forms of cooptation, such as sharing resources and capabilities with rival entities (reinforced by [Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018](#); [McGrath, O'Toole, & Canning, 2019](#)). Another antecedent of cooptation is associated with the magnitude of competition within a market. That is, for cooptation

to exist, organisations require rival firms to collaborate with ([Bengtsson & Kock, 2000](#); [Bouncken & Kraus, 2013](#); [Hoffmann et al., 2018](#)). Thus, certain researchers have explored how competitive forces (like competitive intensity) provide the market-level conditions for cooptation strategies to be implemented (e.g., [Ang, 2008](#); [Bengtsson, Raza-Ullah, & Vanyushyn, 2016](#); [Park et al., 2014](#)). Yet, for cooptation to be effective, owner-managers need to engage in relationships with trustworthy rivals for mutually-beneficial outcomes, including potentially targeting complementary product-markets ([Czakov & Czernek, 2016](#); [Felzensztein, Gimmon, & Deans, 2018](#); [Lascaux, 2020](#)).

Under resource-based theory and the relational view, the competitive business environment can affect the performance outcomes of organisational resources and capabilities, as well as determining which particular strategies that decision-makers implement ([Crick & Crick, 2020](#); [Priem & Butler, 2001](#)). Indeed, from an outside-in perspective, recognition exists of the need for decision-makers to be market-led ([Day, 2014](#); [Mu, Bao, Sekhon, Qi, & Love, 2018](#)). To illustrate, [Day \(2014, p. 28\)](#) offers suggestions of typical questions resulting from an outside-in perspective. "How and why are customers changing? What new needs do they have? What can we do to solve their problems and help them make more money? What new competitors are lurking around the corner, and how can we derail their efforts?" In the context of this current study, the latter question is pertinent, since cooptation activities can assist decision-makers to sense and seize opportunities by collaborating with competitors rather than derailing them as part of their business models (following [Ritala, Golnam, & Wegmann, 2014](#); [Velu, 2016](#)). Nevertheless, in later sections of this paper, some of the barriers to engaging in cooptation activities are illustrated, since political, bureaucratic, and legal forces that can hinder companies from working with their industry rivals throughout global emergencies ([Neuwirth & Svetlicinii, 2015](#); [Schivone & Simoni, 2019](#)). If lifted (or relaxed), these environmental barriers can serve as antecedents of cooptation during a pandemic crisis, like COVID-19, providing that decisions-makers exhibit strategic flexibility in reacting to changing circumstances (as per [Priem & Butler, 2001](#)).

2.5. Cooptation and company performance

Business-to-business marketing researchers have helped to explain the nature of the relationship between cooptation activities and company performance ([Crick, 2019](#); [Ritala, 2012](#)). To illustrate, certain studies have noted that while cooptation might lead to higher-levels of performance (e.g., sales in a linear manner), a non-linear (inverted U-shaped) association might exist ([Crick & Crick, 2020](#); [Luo et al., 2007](#)). That is, with "too little" cooptation, organisations might struggle to achieve their objectives due to possessing an insufficient volume of resources and capabilities ([Dahl, 2014](#); [Rusko, 2011](#); [Velu, 2016](#)). Yet, with "too much" cooptation, there might be a range of dark-sides, including tensions (e.g., conflict, power imbalances, and opportunistic behaviours), lost intellectual property, and diluted competitive advantages ([Tidstrom, 2014](#); [Lacaux, 2020](#)). Consequently, decision-makers are faced with the challenge of engaging in an "optimal-level" of cooptation to avoid these harmful effects on their performance ([Bengtsson et al., 2016](#); [Raza-Ullah et al., 2014](#)). It is recognised that this "inflection point" could be difficult to anticipate, in which decision-makers cannot plan for the exact stage where cooperation ends and rivalry resumes ([Bouncken, Fredrich, Ritala, & Kraus, 2018](#)). However, managers and functional-level employees should consider that cooptation might not always lead to improved performance if they engage in minimal or excessive degrees of these activities ([Ang, 2008](#); [Cui, Yang, & Vertinsky, 2018](#); [Luo et al., 2007](#)).

Additionally, there have been several calls for research to address the moderating factors that might affect the association between cooptation and company performance (see [Czakov, Srivastava, Le Roy, &](#)

Gnyawali, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2018; Shu, Jin, & Zhou, 2017). In fact, certain studies have shown that there are prominent market-level forces (e.g., competitive intensity) that can moderate this relationship (e.g., Crick & Crick, 2020; Luo et al., 2007; Park et al., 2014). To emphasise an earlier point, co-competition strategies are comprised of the paradoxical forces of cooperativeness and competitiveness, meaning that regardless of the extent to which managers and functional-level employees share resources and capabilities with their partners, they are industry rivals (as noted by Mattsson & Tidstrom, 2015; Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). Through these moderating effects, it appears that aspects of the competitive business environment (like competitive intensity) can distort the delicate nature of the co-competition paradox and negatively impact company performance (Ang, 2008). Consequently, decision-makers must collaborate with appropriate competitors (such as those that are trustworthy and/or are targeting complementary product-markets) to mitigate the dark-sides of co-competition activities (Felzensztein & Deans, 2013; Czakon & Czernek, 2016; Lacaux, 2020). In turn, these moderators have identified situations where co-competition is (and is not) a performance-enhancing business-to-business marketing strategy. This current investigation extends these conceptualisations to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of engaging in co-competition within a worldwide pandemic crisis.

2.6. Measurement of the co-competition construct

There have been various operationalisations of the co-competition construct throughout the broader business-to-business marketing literature (including studies underpinned by resource-based theory and the relational view), such as single-indicators, survey-based instruments, dummy variables, archival proximities, and multi-dimensional scales (Ang, 2008; Crick & Crick, 2019; Cui et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2007; Ritala, 2012). While limitations exist in all construct measures (Lee & Cadogan, 2013), co-competition is best-captured in a way that reflects how cooperative and competitive dimensions underpin these business-to-business marketing strategies (see Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016; Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018). This explains why certain operationalisations of the co-competition construct in existing studies have involved a multiplication of cooperation and competition (as per Bengtsson et al., 2016; Shu et al., 2017). In other words, to accurately measure co-competition activities, academics must establish a tool that captures the propensity of these cooperative and competitive behaviours, or the extent to which firms collaborate with their competitors (Bouncken et al., 2018; Bouncken & Kraus, 2013).

This is not a simple task to achieve, as there are differing views on how to capture the variance of co-competition activities. Therefore, this current study draws on practitioner-based insights to illustrate varying ‘collaborative’ changes in firms’ business models in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, when conducting quantitative research involving the operationalisation of the co-competition construct, scholars must find a suitable setting for their investigations. An ideal empirical context for co-competition-based research is a sector that hosts high-degrees of cooperativeness and competitiveness (as noted by Dahl, 2014; Velu, 2016). For example, earlier work has utilised data from agricultural businesses (Felzensztein et al., 2018; Rusko, 2011), sporting organisations (Crick & Crick, 2019), high-tech firms (Ang, 2008; Gnyawali & Park, 2011), alcohol producers (Felzensztein & Deans, 2013; McGrath et al., 2019), and automotive manufacturers (Akpınar & Vincze, 2016; Andersson & Nyberg, 1998). Hence, when evaluating co-competition during times of crisis (as per this current investigation), not only does there need to be these cooperative and competitive forces at play, but also, there should be a crisis that has evidently negatively impacted a sector (following Pangarkar, 2007; Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016). The link between co-competition and COVID-19 is discussed in the next section.

3. Co-competition and COVID-19

3.1. Marketing in times of crisis

There have been numerous studies examining broader marketing activities in times of crisis. These have included firms dealing with a shortage of goods and services (Kotler, 1974), businesses managing marketing strategies during a recession (Naidoo, 2010), advertising throughout a product-harm crisis (Gao, Xie, Wang, & Wilbur, 2015), and multinational corporations struggling to resolve problems associated with the global financial crisis (Williams & Martinez, 2012). In the marketing domain, a crisis can take many forms, but ultimately, it surrounds a large-scale situation where an event has involved a drastic and negative impact on an organisation, its customers, competitors, employees, and other relevant stakeholders (see Clark, 1988; Grewal & Tansuhaj, 2001). However, a limited body of knowledge surrounds marketing in a pandemic crisis offering an opportunity to contribute to the business-to-business marketing literature. Existing research has focused on public policy decisions or business-to-consumer marketing activities – as opposed to business-to-business marketing relationships (e.g., Kennedy, Harris, & Lord, 2004). Furthermore, there have been many investigations associated with health marketing in dealing with crises, but these investigations are typically focused on hospitals and care providers managing resources and capabilities to treat patients (as noted by Schiavone & Simoni, 2019).

3.2. Co-competition activities and large-scale emergencies

There is scarce research surrounding how co-competition might help to overcome the effects of a worldwide emergency (see Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016). For example, Pangarkar (2007) found that engaging in alliances assisted organisations to improve their survival prospects during the global financial crisis. Pangarkar (2007) highlighted that alliances helped these organisations to lower their operating costs, boost productivity, and create value for their customers (supplementing Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2003; Ritala, 2012; Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018). Therefore, this current paper investigates how co-competition has been implemented by certain organisations in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. These issues complement the recent work that has examined other business-to-business marketing strategies related to this global pandemic (e.g., Cortez & Johnston, 2020). The subsequent news stories are related to pertinent issues within the business-to-business marketing literature to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the co-competition construct and its benefits for the companies involved, together with their customers, and other key stakeholders. These extend, through a co-competition perspective, the topical points made by other scholars regarding how firms might adapt their business models in response to COVID-19 (Chesborough, 2020; Lund Pedersen & Ritter, 2020).

3.3. British supermarkets sharing resources and capabilities

In March 2020, like various other countries, the British government instructed its citizens to remain at home (where possible) to minimise the spread of COVID-19 (United Kingdom Government, 2020). Yet, public health officials allowed members of the public to leave their homes to purchase essential items, like food and medical supplies, as well as getting exercise within a close geographic proximity. Therefore, supermarkets have been in high-demand, with consumers engaged in panic-buying goods, such as canned food, toilet paper, dairy products, meat, and vegetables (Daily Mail, 2020). Amidst this “new reality”, competition laws in the United Kingdom have been relaxed to allow retailers to share data about stock levels, coordinate closure times (to allow cleaning and inventory replenishment), access supply chain networks, and loan employees between rival stores (Independent, 2020). There can be certain legal, political, and bureaucratic regulations that prevent organisations from engaging in co-competition activities during a

pandemic (as noted by [Neuwirth & Svetlicinii, 2015](#)). In this instance, by allowing competing retailers to share these resources and capabilities, they have been able to operate more efficiently, like having higher-levels of stock to meet an unprecedented demand. Interestingly, [Neuwirth & Svetlicinii \(2015\)](#) focused on health care providers, as opposed to privately-owned businesses (e.g., retailers) affected by a large-scale emergency.

The example of British retailers engaging in co-competition relates to vertical and horizontal channels ([Lacoste, 2012](#); [Velu, 2016](#)). Furthermore, these supermarkets are still being regulated to ensure that collusion does not occur, but to a lesser extent than before the COVID-19 outbreak ([Independent, 2020](#)). Accordingly, there are two issues that connect these behavioural forms of co-competition with the business-to-business marketing literature. One factor is that co-competition helps firms to improve their performance, but only up to a fixed point, since there are environmental-level forces (e.g., the prior-mentioned political, bureaucratic, and legal regulations) that can limit their performance (following [Luo et al., 2007](#); [Raza-Ullah et al., 2014](#)). Another area to consider is that under resource-based theory and the relational view, there are environmental conditions that can affect the strategies that organisations implement ([Crick & Crick, 2020](#); [Priem & Butler, 2001](#)). From a market-led perspective, these forces can drive decision-makers to seek support from external stakeholders (e.g., rivals) to survive and grow within their markets ([Day, 2014](#); [Mu et al., 2018](#)). Thus, co-competition in the British retailing sector provides an illustration of how changing market conditions can cause companies to adapt their business models to engage in co-competition strategies. In doing so, it offers improved insights into the aspects of the competitive business environment that can affect the co-competition paradox in times of crisis. This expands earlier work that has focused on factors, like competitive intensity, and their effect on these activities ([Ang, 2008](#); [Cui et al., 2018](#); [Park et al., 2014](#)).

3.4. Pharmaceutical companies working together for health-related outcomes

According to the [New York Times \(2020\)](#), pharmaceutical companies from the United States, China, and Germany have been working together by sharing knowledge and equipment to develop a vaccine for COVID-19, as well as manufacturers producing medical supplies (e.g., ventilators, masks, and other breathing devices). These rivals have been sharing scientific data, such as from experiments and clinical trials to expedite the process of finding treatment options for the disease. As already noted, there are often bureaucratic, political, and legal factors that serve as barriers for the implementation of co-competition strategies during pandemics ([Neuwirth & Svetlicinii, 2015](#); [Schivone & Simoni, 2019](#)). In this situation, the facilitation of inter-country-level co-competition has taken place through not only relaxed laws on cooperation versus competition, but also, a common incentive to develop a cure, or at least treatment options as quickly as possible. To stress an important consideration mentioned earlier, during all co-competition partnerships, there needs to be a mutually-beneficial outcome, which is typically higher-levels of performance ([Bouncken & Kraus, 2013](#); [Czakov et al., 2020](#)). Here, that shared outcome is the greater good for human health (and the associated economic benefits), offering a new, but large-scale reason for engaging in co-competition as a business-to-business marketing strategy (building upon [Rusko, 2011](#); [Ritala, 2012](#); [Crick, 2019](#)).

These organisations have demonstrated that despite there being institutional differences at play ([Williams & Martinez, 2012](#)), there are short-term cooperative factors that outweigh certain rivalrous behaviours. This news story relates to [Bengtsson & Kock's \(2000\)](#) seminal paper on co-competition having varied degrees of cooperation, vis-à-vis, competition. That is, there are situations where firms are more collaborative than competitive (see [Bengtsson et al., 2016](#); [Hoffmann et al., 2018](#)). This news story from the [New York Times \(2020\)](#) shows how companies that normally exhibit high-degrees of rivalry have used this

global pandemic to collaborate for the greater good. Furthermore, there has been scarce research pertaining to co-competition in an international arena (e.g., [Felzensztein et al., 2014](#); [Shu et al., 2017](#)). This inter-country-level co-competition arrangement illustrates how companies can pool resources and capabilities across national borders for mutually-beneficial outcomes. In fact, it supports [Luo's \(2007\)](#) argument that globalisation allows competitors to collaborate to achieve shared performance outcomes, even if they are located across large distances.

3.5. Technological collaboration for the greater good

A group of rival technological businesses has joined forces to combat the cybersecurity threats associated with the pandemic (namely, the COVID-19 CTI League), including senior professionals from Microsoft and Amazon ([Security, 2020](#)). The reason being is that during the heightened uncertainty, together with the larger number of people working from home and using the internet for online shopping, there is an increased chance of cyberattacks, such as phishing attempts. The COVID-19 CTI League contains approximately 400 members from competing firms focused on reducing these electronic threats. In the case of the COVID-19 CTI League, these high-tech firms already possessed the beliefs and assumptions that cooperating with rival firms is likely to help them to perform better than if they competed under an individualistic business model (as evidenced by [Security, 2020](#)). This supports earlier studies that have found that a co-competition-oriented mind-set is a key driver of behavioural forms of co-competition (e.g., [Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018](#); [Gnyawali & Park, 2011](#); [McGrath et al., 2019](#)). As such, they were ready to engage in these collaborative business-to-business marketing strategies in this time of crisis. It appears that the members of the COVID-19 CTI League were equipped with the resources and capabilities required to foster their co-competition-oriented mind-sets into co-competition strategies to play an important role in helping consumers and organisations during the pandemic. Hence, it is important that organisations can develop their co-competition strategies by investing value-adding tangible and intangible assets to obtain mutually-beneficial outcomes from their business-to-business relationships (reinforcing [Ritala et al., 2014](#); [Czakov & Czernek, 2016](#)).

Technological collaboration has taken place in other capacities related to COVID-19. As an example, Apple and Google have been working together to enhance tracking technology to calculate the number of infected people, individuals that have been in close contact with those contracting the disease, and the number of cases and deaths in certain regions ([The Guardian, 2020](#)). Currently, the data-sharing aspects of the Apple i-phone system are not compatible with androids – something that this co-competition partnership is designed to overcome. By engaging in this form of co-competition, several benefits are evident. First, this business-to-business marketing strategy means companies are creating value for society by monitoring who has the disease and potentially saving lives (building upon [Milne, Iyer, & Gooding-Williams, 1996](#)). Second, there is a corporate social responsibility initiative by appearing to be organisations employing their resources and capabilities to help end this pandemic (in line with [Neuwirth & Svetlicinii, 2015](#)). Third, talented employees can increase their productivity by possessing new assets and information, resulting in these companies working with improved data that allows them to produce superior goods and services in the future (extending [Lacoste, 2012](#)). Collectively, through the COVID-19 outbreak, these large-scale technologically-oriented co-competition strategies emphasise that there can be numerous advantages of these business-to-business marketing relationships ([Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018](#); [Gnyawali & Park, 2011](#)). These processes do not simply pertain to higher-levels of performance (as per [Ang, 2008](#); [Ritala, 2012](#); [Crick, 2019](#)), but also, include other success factors like social outcomes that signify that co-competition is a beneficial strategy in times of crisis ([Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016](#); [Pangarkar, 2007](#)).

3.6. Non-profit organisations forming alliances for a joint cause

Turning to the non-profit sector, a small cluster of competing charities in the United Kingdom have been working together in a business-to-business marketing capacity through joint fundraising efforts, borrowing equipment (e.g., call centres and vehicles), and sharing members of staff and volunteers to respond to COVID-19 (Wyllie, 2020). Charities operate towards improving awareness of (or eliminating) a certain issue (e.g., homelessness, cancer research, heart disease, and animal welfare), meaning that it can be appropriate for them to collaborate with competing firms to achieve their “social” objectives (O’Shaughnessy, 1996). Concerning a rationale for charities engaging in coopetition in response to this pandemic, there have been increased levels of homelessness and hunger due to individuals losing their employment and companies declaring bankruptcy (CNN, 2020). This has meant that charities are facing higher-degrees of pressure, in terms of needing to help vulnerable populations. The societal-level contribution of this business-to-business marketing strategy towards the COVID-19 pandemic relates to the mutually-beneficial non-profit outcome of coopetition activities that charities aim to fulfil, as opposed to sales and profitability, which is of greater interest to private companies (see Milne et al., 1996). In other words, the employment of this form of coopetition has taken place to tackle the devastating consequences of the pandemic, whereby, these non-profit organisations have put aside their competitive differences (regarding the need for donations) to work together for this joint cause (Wyllie, 2020). Over and above the “social” value of these business-to-business marketing relationships, this form of coopetition symbolises that these activities assist under-resourced organisations to yield higher-levels of performance, alongside other mutually-beneficial outcomes (following Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Rusko, 2011; Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018). Furthermore, these charities have shown how changing market-level forces can alter the cooperative and competitive dynamics within a sector, driving these non-profit organisations to collaborate with their rivals (building upon Priem & Butler, 2001; Crick, 2019). Some managerial implications and recommendations follow.

4. Managerial implications and recommendations

This paper offers the following implications for practitioners. First, if decision-makers are operating in times of crisis, they should utilise certain market-level conditions that allow them to collaborate with their competitors. For instance:

- If competition laws are relaxed, firms should capitalise on the increased freedom to share resources and capabilities with their trustworthy and complementary industry rivals for mutually-beneficial outcomes.
- In a worldwide emergency, organisations are recommended to explore the potential mutual benefits of using coopetition strategies to yield higher-levels of performance, meeting unprecedented demand, operating efficient supply chains, or indeed, simply surviving within a volatile market.

Second, following on, owner-managers should be aware of the extent to which they are permitted (by law) to engage in coopetition partnerships. That is:

- Businesses should cooperate with their competitors to enhance their performance, but not in ways that government rules do not allow, such as forming monopolies, charging extortionate prices, or driving prices down to affect the performance of certain smaller-sized rivals that are not part of their coopetition partnerships.
- While coopetition might be allowed to cope with a crisis (e.g., COVID-19), many countries still have regulations that penalise firms that engage in collusive competitive practices. Accordingly,

companies must not engage in these illegal forms of coopetition.

Third, coopetition is comprised of cooperative and competitive dimensions, meaning that although it involves organisations working with their rivals, there will always be some form of competitiveness at play (no matter how small). Consequently:

- Decision-makers should avoid depending on their coopetition partners to survive within their markets by having some provisions that allow them to compete under an individualistic business model via their own resources and capabilities.
- Owner-managers are encouraged to acknowledge that once this global pandemic is over (and the regulation of certain forms of coopetition are potentially enforced), it might be challenging to end their partnerships with rivals. Thus, they should agree on the extent to which they will cooperate, vis-à-vis, compete with their rivals in advance of changing circumstances.

Fourth, owner-managers and functional-level employees must acknowledge that coopetition is a risky business-to-business marketing strategy, as there can be negative outcomes. Hence:

- Decision-makers should engage in complementary coopetition activities with trustworthy partners, but avoid negative situations that lead to tensions (e.g., conflict, power imbalances, and opportunistic behaviours), lost intellectual property, and diluted competitive advantages.
- To minimise the dark-sides of coopetition from occurring, it is recommended that owner-managers and functional-level employees should be vigilant for situations that involve coopetition partners behaving opportunistically. This will indicate when it is time to exit from these relationships.

Collectively, these managerial implications serve as actionable considerations for practitioners when implementing coopetition strategies during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 outbreak. For clarity, coopetition has the potential to be a rewarding (performance-enhancing) business-to-business marketing strategy, but there are risks associated with companies working with untrustworthy competitors. Following these guidelines, if managed correctly, coopetition activities can be advantageous throughout a global emergency. Some directions for future research follow in the next section.

5. Directions for future research

While a body of knowledge exists on the notion of coopetition throughout the broader business-to-business marketing literature (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Crick & Crick, 2019; Czakon et al., 2020; Pattinson et al., 2018), there are several directions for future research. First, empirical research should take place to evaluate the implementation of coopetition activities in times of crisis, such as those in response to COVID-19 (building upon Pangarkar, 2007; Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016). That is:

RQ1. : Under what circumstances did companies (across different industry and national contexts) cooperate with their rivals during the COVID-19 outbreak?

RQ2. : What were the antecedents of these coopetition strategies throughout this pandemic crisis (e.g., critical resources and capabilities)?

RQ3. : What were the outcomes of these coopetition activities within this large-scale emergency (e.g., improvements in company performance)?

Second, since cooperative and competitive forces underpin behavioural forms of coopetition (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016; Lascaux,

2020; Luo et al., 2007; Mattsson & Tidstrom, 2015) it is of interest to evaluate what will happen once the COVID-19 emergency has ended. For clear reasons, it is not possible to explore these issues until this global pandemic is over, but some research questions to consider are:

RQ4. : Will companies continue to engage in coopetition, or will they pursue individualistic business models by utilising their own resources and capabilities?

RQ5. : If firms terminate certain coopetition partnerships, what does this process look like in practice (such as withdrawing key tangible and intangible assets)?

RQ6. : How long will it take owner-managers and functional-level employees to separate from their coopetition arrangements?

RQ7. : Can organisations (small and large) survive under an individualistic business model once the COVID-19 outbreak has ended?

Third, future research should address some of the dark-sides of coopetition during (and after) a pandemic if effective management does not occur. Under ordinary (non-crisis) circumstances, coopetition activities can be harmful for company performance, including yielding tensions (e.g., conflict, power imbalances, and opportunistic behaviours), lost intellectual property, and diluted competitive advantages (Crick & Crick, 2020; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014; Tidstrom, 2014). Therefore:

RQ8. : Are there any dark-sides of coopetition activities during (and after) a pandemic crisis (such as harmful performance consequences)?

RQ9. : If coopetition is implemented throughout a large-scale emergency, is there a positive or negative association with company performance, or is this association more complex (e.g., non-linear – inverted U-shaped – with moderating effects)?

RQ10. : How can managers and functional-level employees manage coopetition partnerships within a global crisis to mitigate these potentially devastating outcomes?

In short, instead of focusing on public policy issues or business-to-consumer marketing decisions (e.g., Gao et al., 2015; Neuwirth & Svetlicinii, 2015; Schiavone & Simoni, 2019), these directions for future research highlight how business-to-business marketing scholars can contribute to knowledge surrounding the role of coopetition strategies during (and after) a pandemic crisis (e.g., COVID-19). These complement the earlier implications and recommendations for practitioners. Conclusions follow to end this paper.

6. Conclusions

Guided by resource-based theory and the relational view, the objective of this paper was to examine how organisations can adapt their business models through implementing coopetition strategies during times of crisis (concentrating on COVID-19). To achieve this research objective, various scholarly and practical sources were reviewed, which in turn, yield the following three conclusions. The first conclusion is that coopetition can be an effective business-to-business marketing strategy in a pandemic – having the potential to benefit the organisations involved in such partnerships (as well as their customers and other key stakeholders). The second conclusion is that coopetition activities are comprised of cooperative and competitive forces, whereby, decision-makers should be careful about which competitors they collaborate with, as there can be harmful outcomes on their performance. The third (and final) conclusion is that once the COVID-19 outbreak has ended, there are questions surrounding whether these existing coopetition strategies will continue, or be terminated in the future. In this current study, these questions were formulated into some interesting directions for future research that business-to-business marketing scholars are encouraged to pursue.

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