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Harnessing Coopetition for Competitive Advantage: A Cluster-Based Analysis

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Abstract
This paper investigates the phenomenon of coopetition within the context of a large cluster of companies in the furniture industry. Coopetition, a strategic approach where competing firms collaborate to achieve mutual benefits, is explored through a two-stage analysis to understand its dynamics and potential within this industrial cluster. In the first stage, the study defines the general characteristics of the coopetition potential within the cluster. This analysis is grounded in the authors' previous research and employs the Cygler methodology to assess the extent to which companies in the cluster are poised for coopetitive interactions. This methodological approach provides a comprehensive overview of the cluster's overall readiness and potential for engaging in coopetition, highlighting key factors that influence these dynamics. The second stage of the analysis adopts a case study approach, focusing on three companies within the cluster that vary in terms of market position and asset potential. These case studies offer a detailed examination of how different types of companies within the same cluster engage in coopetitive relationships. By assessing these companies individually, the study identifies distinct patterns and categories of coopetition that can be practically applied in business strategies. The findings of the study demonstrate that at the level of the furniture production cluster, individual companies can be classified into different categories based on their coopetitive interactions. These classifications are particularly useful for understanding how businesses can innovate and optimize their coopetition strategies to enhance competitive advantage and foster mutual growth. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of coopetition in industrial clusters, offering valuable insights into how companies can effectively navigate and leverage coopetitive relationships. The study's findings have practical implications for business leaders and policymakers looking to foster innovation and collaboration within clustered industries.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Coopetition refers to a unique business strategy where companies engage in both cooperation and competition simultaneously. This relationship allows firms to work together in areas where they can mutually benefit—such as research and development, marketing, or resource sharing—while still competing in other areas, like market share or product offerings. Coopetition is considered one of the fundamental types of relationships between competitors, enabling them to achieve common goals while maintaining a competitive edge. This strategy is increasingly recognized in various industries for its potential to foster innovation, improve market positioning, and enhance overall business performance. The specific nature of coopetition is rooted in syncretism, meaning the blending of seemingly contradictory elements—cooperation and competition—within the same relationship. Traditionally viewed as opposites, these two features coexist in coopetition, where companies collaborate in some aspects of their operations while competing in others. A brief definition of coopetition describes it as the relationship between two companies that cooperate in certain areas, such as innovation, resource sharing, or marketing, while simultaneously competing in areas like market dominance, customer acquisition, or product differentiation.

Coopetition encompasses both economic and non-economic transactions. The economic aspect refers to tangible business exchanges, such as partnerships in supply chains or joint ventures. The non-economic dimension, on the other hand, involves more informal interactions, often centered around building trust between the companies. These informal relationships are critical for maintaining the balance between cooperation and competition, as trust helps companies navigate the delicate interplay between mutual benefit and competitive advantage. Therefore, while coopetition is often seen as a foundational element for creating a functional value chain between companies—demonstrated, for example, through the development of complementary relationships—its true essence, particularly in the long-term, rests on a substantial level of mutual trust. Trust is the key factor that enables companies to balance the inherent tension between cooperation and competition. Without trust, the risk of one party exploiting the other becomes too great, undermining the potential benefits of collaboration. Over time, trust allows firms to engage in deeper, more strategic partnerships, fostering innovation, efficiency, and shared value creation, while still maintaining their competitive distinctiveness in other areas.

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From a strategic perspective, coopetition emerges as a natural consequence of two key factors: market co-existence and asymmetry in access to resources. These dynamics shape the relationship between companies, creating a complex interplay of competition and cooperation. Market co-existence refers to the scenario where companies operate within the same industry or sector, often targeting similar customer bases or competing for the same market share. This proximity in the marketplace fosters competitiveness, as each company seeks to outperform the others in terms of innovation, product offerings, customer loyalty, and overall profitability. The competitive drive pushes companies to differentiate themselves, improve efficiency, and offer superior products or services. In this sense, competition is a vital force that encourages innovation and growth. However, asymmetry in access to resources introduces a different dynamic, one that encourages cooperation. Companies often possess different levels of access to key resources—whether those are technological capabilities, distribution networks, intellectual property, financial capital, or human expertise. One firm may excel in R&D, while another may have superior market penetration or production capabilities. This imbalance presents an opportunity for collaboration, as companies can leverage each other's strengths to compensate for their respective weaknesses. In such cases, cooperation becomes a strategic necessity, allowing firms to share resources, reduce costs, and accelerate innovation, ultimately benefiting both parties. This duality of competition and cooperation is what defines coopetition as a strategic framework. Companies recognize that they can be fierce competitors in one area, such as market share or product innovation, while simultaneously collaborating in another area where they stand to benefit from each other's resources or expertise. For instance, technology companies might compete in the consumer electronics market but collaborate on developing industry standards or pooling research for technological advancements. Similarly, automotive companies may compete in vehicle sales while partnering on shared platforms or electric vehicle infrastructure.

The strategic logic behind coopetition is rooted in the understanding that long-term success often depends on a careful balance between leveraging competitive advantages and seeking collaborative synergies. Companies that can navigate this balance effectively are more likely to gain an edge over those that either focus exclusively on competition or overemphasize cooperation. This balance is especially crucial in industries undergoing rapid technological change or facing significant global challenges, such as sustainability, where companies may need to collaborate on large-scale solutions while continuing to compete in their respective markets.

Moreover, trust plays a central role in the success of coopetition. While market co-existence and resource asymmetry create the conditions for coopetition, the ability to manage the tension between competition and cooperation relies heavily on building and maintaining mutual trust. Without trust, the risk of one party exploiting the other or reneging on agreements becomes too high, and the potential benefits of cooperation diminish. Over time, trust enables firms to engage in more strategic, long-term partnerships, where both parties are confident that they will share in the value created by their collaboration. In this way, coopetition not only reflects a tactical response to immediate market conditions but also becomes a strategic approach for fostering innovation, optimizing resource use, and driving sustainable growth. Companies that successfully integrate coopetition into their strategic planning can create a competitive advantage that is both dynamic and adaptable, allowing them to thrive in a rapidly changing global business environment. By blending the forces of competition and cooperation, firms can better position themselves to capitalize on opportunities, overcome challenges, and drive the creation of value—not just for themselves but for the entire market ecosystem in which they operate. Among the various theoretical frameworks for understanding the coopetition phenomenon, one influential proposal distinguishes between four types of relationships: competition, cooperation, coexistence, and coopetition. The decision on which relationship type a company engages in is influenced by several factors, but two critical elements stand out: the company's position in its industry—whether dominant or weak—and its access to external resources, particularly whether it has a high or low need for such access.

When a company has a dominant position in its industry and does not require much in the way of external resources, it is more likely to engage in straightforward competition. These firms possess sufficient internal capabilities and market power to succeed independently, and they typically view other companies as rivals rather than potential collaborators. In this situation, the firm's strategy focuses on outperforming competitors through superior products or market capture, without the need to collaborate or share resources. Cooperation, on the other hand, becomes essential for companies with a weak position in their industry and a high need for external resources. Such firms recognize that they cannot achieve success on their own and must collaborate with others to gain access to the necessary resources, whether in the form of technological expertise, market access, or knowledge. By forming alliances, partnerships, or joint ventures, they strengthen their competitive position and pursue goals that would be unattainable alone.

In some cases, companies may coexist within the same market space without directly competing or cooperating. This tends to happen when a firm holds a dominant position but has a low need for external resources. In this scenario, companies acknowledge each other's presence but do not actively interact or engage in resource sharing. This form of coexistence is common in situations where firms operate in distinct niches or serve different customer bases, reducing the need for direct competition or collaboration. Coopetition, the focus of this study, arises when companies are in a strong market position but also have a high need for external resources. These firms recognize that, while they may be competitors in certain areas, collaboration in others can provide access to crucial resources and help overcome shared challenges. For example, technology companies might compete in product sales while collaborating on industry standards or research initiatives.

Coopetition combines the competitive drive for market dominance with the practical need for cooperation in areas that benefit both parties. The choice to engage in coopetition is influenced by a company's industry position and resource needs. A dominant firm may feel more secure in collaborating with competitors because of its market power, while a weaker firm may cooperate out of necessity. Similarly, a company with ample internal resources may prefer competition or coexistence, while one in need of external support may seek collaboration, including coopetition.

This framework suggests that companies are not limited to purely competitive or cooperative relationships. Depending on the strategic context, businesses can adopt a flexible approach, leveraging the advantages of both competition and cooperation. Coopetition, as a hybrid strategy, offers firms a way to navigate complex and dynamic market environments, especially in industries where collaboration is necessary for innovation but firms must continue competing for market leadership. A dominant position in the market tends to push companies toward either a competitive (COM) or coopetitive (CP) relationship. Firms that are strong in their sector may choose to engage in direct competition to maintain or expand their market dominance, or they might opt for coopetition, balancing competition with strategic cooperation when it benefits both parties. On the other hand, a high need for external resources nudges companies toward either coopetition (CP) or cooperation (CO). In these cases, the company recognizes that while it may compete with others, it also needs to collaborate to access resources or capabilities that it lacks internally. In a reverse scenario, where a company holds a weaker position in the market, the choice typically leans toward either cooperation (CO) or coexistence (CE). Weaker firms are more likely to cooperate to improve their standing or coexist without directly confronting stronger competitors. Additionally, if a firm has a low need for external resources, it is more likely to favor competition (COM) or coexistence (CE). Without the need for collaboration to obtain external resources, such companies can either maintain independence and avoid direct engagement or compete more aggressively.

The indications provided offer a synthetic view of the dynamics shaping the relationship between competition, cooperation, coexistence, and coopetition, but they do not account for the impact of more detailed factors that can significantly influence the nature of these relationships. For example, sectorial characteristics, such as the level of technology, market structure, and the degree of industry concentration, can play a crucial role in determining how firms interact. Similarly, the corporate profile of the entities involved—encompassing factors like company objectives, strategies, size, and organizational structure—can shape the type of relationship firms are likely to adopt. Additionally, the effects of territorial concentration, especially in the context of business clusters, should not be overlooked. In cases where companies are organized within a cluster or where there is a more spontaneous grouping of business entities, the dynamics of the relationships between firms take on a special character. This phenomenon, known as clustering, is associated with the nature of the bonds formed, the regularity of interactions, and the longevity of the relationships between entities. Studies of such economic systems reveal that clusters can significantly influence the intensity and sustainability of both cooperative and competitive interactions. The clustering phenomenon fosters a unique environment where frequent interactions, shared resources, and geographic proximity can lead to stronger and longer-lasting partnerships or more nuanced competitive behaviors, as noted by Kaźmierski (2012: 51). These additional factors highlight the complexity of the interactions between firms and suggest that the relationship between competition and cooperation is far from straightforward, often shaped by both industry-specific and geographic considerations.

The issue explored in this paper focuses on analyzing and evaluating the factors that drive company cooperation within a large territorial cluster, where the unique characteristics of such clusters are expected to encourage the formation of relationships typical of coopetition. The assessment is carried out in two stages, with the main goal being an evaluation of coopetition within the context of a furniture cluster. This investigation centered on three production firms of varying sizes.

The first stage involves examining the general context of collaboration within the furniture industry cluster, drawing on a set of factors related to sectorial and organizational characteristics as outlined in J. Cygler's model. This stage builds upon the authors' prior research, which assessed the cooperation of 14 furniture companies (Kroik and Świda, 2016: 71-79), and provides a foundation for interpreting more specific case studies in the next phase. The second stage delves into three detailed case studies of companies within the furniture cluster. These firms were chosen based on their differences in market potential and operational scale, which naturally led to varying approaches to competition and innovation. Structured interviews were conducted with the owners and managers of these companies to uncover any potential differences in how they perceive the role of cooperation in shaping competitive advantage, as well as the innovations related to such partnerships. The interviews aimed to highlight variations in the firms' priorities and motivations regarding collaboration, competition, and innovation within the coopetitive dynamics of the cluster. Through this approach, the study sought to offer a nuanced understanding of how companies within a territorial cluster navigate the balance between competition and cooperation, and how these relationships contribute to their competitive positioning and innovation strategies.

Taking a case study approach is particularly recommended for examining cooperation relations, especially given the challenges involved in collecting data and understanding the specific research context (Cygler, 2009: 216). Case studies allow for in-depth exploration of the complexities and dynamics of relationships within a specific setting, offering detailed insights that might be difficult to capture through broader quantitative methods. The authors followed the general procedures associated with this approach, as outlined by Dondajewska (2016: 43), aiming to provide a thorough analysis of the cooperation dynamics among the selected firms. The research goal was to determine the nature of the coopetition (or

cooperation) that exists among the three furniture cluster firms. By focusing on these specific cases, the study was able to explore the unique characteristics of each firm, including their market positions, operational scales, and strategic approaches to innovation and competition. This case-based methodology enabled a detailed investigation into the ways in which these firms engage in cooperative and competitive relationships within the cluster, shedding light on how coopetition manifests in their interactions and contributes to their business strategies.

2. ASSESSMENT OF THE SECTORIAL COOPETITION

The potential assessment of coopetition in the furniture production cluster was carried out using the methodology designed to study coopetition potential, focusing on two key dimensions: sectorial factors and corporate (organizational) factors. As previously mentioned, the sectorial dimension was evaluated based on the results of earlier research that involved 14 production companies within the Kępno furniture cluster. These sectorial characteristics were assumed to represent the broader furniture production sector, given that approximately 1,000 business entities are registered within this cluster, according to data from the County Office in Kępno. Therefore, the characteristics of this sample are seen as a reliable reflection of the overall sector with a high probability of accuracy. The factor weights used in the analysis were consistent with the original methodology proposed by J. Cygler. The synthetic indicator of the coopetition potential for the furniture production center was calculated as PKzm = 65/11 = 5.9, where the maximum possible value is 115/11 = 10.45. This yields a percentage potential of PKzm% = 5.9/10.45 = 56.5%. This result suggests that the estimated coopetition potential in the sectorial dimension, when viewed from the perspective of the furniture production center, is relatively close to the conventional threshold of 60%, which is considered the benchmark for ensuring favorable conditions for stable coopetition (Cygler, 2009: 199). It is important to note that the 56.5% estimation could be slightly conservative due to the method of averaging the perspectives of the 14 managers and owners surveyed. For example, certain evaluations, such as those regarding the level of technology or the susceptibility of firms to globalization pressures, may have been underestimated. Consequently, under specific conditions, the threshold result of 60% could potentially be achieved, providing a stronger indication of coopetition readiness within the sector. This suggests that the cluster exhibits relatively favorable conditions for coopetition, though it remains just below the optimal threshold for ensuring long-term stability and cooperation.

3. THE PREMISES FOR COMPETITION OF THREE COMPANIES

The analysis presented, which assesses the coopetition potential of the furniture production center in two dimensions—sectorial and organizational—serves as a basis for exploring individual company cases within the cluster. It is reasonable to assume that companies with stronger market positions and resource advantages will have a different perspective on cooperation compared to those with weaker standings. This differentiation in perspectives aligns with findings from previous research, which indicate that companies' positions within the market significantly influence their willingness to cooperate and compete. A unique aspect of this study lies in the context of a geographically concentrated cluster of companies from the same industry. Given this strong territorial integration, the cluster is likely to exhibit characteristics typical of such groupings, including a heightened willingness among firms to share knowledge, technology, and product offerings. As these companies work together, their collective effectiveness in competing against external rivals is expected to improve (Czakon, 2013: 127). Operating within a cluster creates an environment where cooperation and competition coexist, directly influencing the competitiveness of the firms involved. The presence of multiple competitors in close proximity stimulates innovation, while the closeness of relationships fosters a pro-innovation attitude. This geographic and organizational closeness allows firms to continuously and directly monitor the market, share knowledge, and leverage the skills and experiences of the local labor force, facilitating organic growth and adaptability (Grzebyk, 2009: 22).

In other words, cooperation within a cluster serves as a powerful driver of innovation, accelerating the processes of creation and knowledge transfer. This dynamic is supported by contemporary models of innovation, which emphasize the importance of collaboration, mutual trust, and knowledge exchange. Such models are inherently aligned with the cluster concept, which thrives on close-knit relationships, the sharing of technology, and the exchange of experiences. The effectiveness of these processes also depends on proper communication between entities, ensuring that the collective benefits of the cluster are fully realized (Stanienda, 2014: 189-190). Thus, the furniture production cluster not only provides a fertile ground for coopetition but also fosters an environment where innovation is continuously nurtured and accelerated. The proximity of partners, the trust developed through shared experiences, and the combination of competition and cooperation create an ecosystem that enhances both individual company performance and the cluster's overall competitiveness. This unique environment is crucial for firms looking to thrive in increasingly global and competitive markets, where the ability to innovate quickly and collaborate effectively can determine long-term success.

The aforementioned circumstances provide a solid foundation for the case study to explore the specific conditions that contribute to the development of competitiveness and innovation among companies within the examined economic cluster. This approach enables researchers to conduct an in-depth investigation of the factors influencing these companies' success in balancing competition and cooperation. The method of data collection is based on structured interviews, utilizing a questionnaire designed with 22 questions, partially modeled on the framework proposed by M. Gorynia (2008: 223-224). The interviews, conducted by J. Durczak between May and June 2017, aimed to gather qualitative insights supported by

quantitative data. The study focused on three companies within the cluster, each selected based on their differing market positions and production capacities. To protect confidentiality, the owners and managers interviewed requested anonymity for their companies. These firms, all privately owned Polish enterprises, have been operating in the cluster for over 20 years, during which time they have developed unique approaches to competition and cooperation. For the sake of clarity in describing and interpreting the collected data, three symbols—S, M, and L—were introduced to represent the companies, based solely on their size as measured by the number of employees. This classification aids in drawing comparisons between the companies while preserving the confidentiality of their identities.

By analyzing these companies within the context of their long-term involvement in the cluster, the study aims to reveal how factors such as market potential, production capacity, and employee size shape their strategies for maintaining competitiveness and fostering innovation. The structured interviews provide a window into how these firms navigate the balance between competing with others in the cluster while simultaneously benefiting from cooperative efforts, such as sharing resources, knowledge, and market insights. This case study approach also offers an opportunity to explore how different levels of market and production potential influence a company's orientation toward coopetition, highlighting the various ways that companies can thrive within a densely interconnected industrial ecosystem. Company "S" is a small enterprise employing fewer than 30 people. It operates as a production, commercial, and service company owned by a private individual and was founded in 1996. Company "M" is a medium-sized production and commercial enterprise, employing between 71 and 150 people. It too is run by a private individual and was established in 1989. The third company, "L," is a large production and commercial firm, employing around 250 people, and operates as a limited liability company. This company was established in 1991. In evaluating the location-related factors for these firms, the focus is on access to target markets, the acquisition of resources, and the proximity for monitoring competition. Each company's perspective on these factors varies, influenced by their size, structure, and history within the cluster. For example, Company "M" may have initially prioritized family-related or historical reasons when making decisions about location, shaping a different perspective on market access and resource acquisition compared to the other companies. This difference is reflected in the varying importance placed on key reasons for their current position, as outlined in Table 4.

The smaller size of Company "S" might mean that access to the target market is more critical, given its limited resources and need to establish a foothold in the competitive environment. On the other hand, Company "L," being larger, may prioritize the ability to monitor competition closely and acquire resources more efficiently due to its broader market reach and production capacity. The legal structure of Company "L" as a limited liability company also suggests a more formalized organizational framework compared to Companies "S" and "M," which are run by individuals, influencing their approaches to market dynamics and coopetition within the cluster. This nuanced understanding of how these firms perceive their location-related factors helps explain their different strategies for competing and cooperating within the same industrial cluster. These strategies, in turn, affect how they leverage the benefits of proximity, such as knowledge sharing and competitive intelligence, to enhance their market positions and innovation capabilities.

When assessing the need for and significance of collaboration across various elements of the close and distant environment, the companies expressed differing levels of importance. The small company, "S," in particular, did not perceive a strong need for collaboration in several areas. Due to its smaller scale of operations and limited resources, the company likely focuses more on immediate survival and efficiency rather than establishing partnerships or cooperation in its broader environment. Its more limited market reach and operational scope may reduce the perceived necessity for collaboration, especially in elements of the business environment that might be more relevant to larger enterprises. For Company "S," collaboration may not be seen as essential in areas like research and development, joint marketing efforts, or technology sharing, which are typically prioritized by larger firms with more extensive resource bases. Its small size may also mean that it views collaboration as an additional cost or effort that does not offer immediate returns, particularly when the focus is on maintaining core business operations. On the other hand, the medium-sized company "M" and the large company "L" acknowledged a stronger need for collaboration, especially in areas where they benefit from the resources, knowledge, or market access provided by partnerships. For Company "M," collaboration might be more situational, depending on the specific goals and challenges faced at different stages of growth. Meanwhile, Company "L," with its larger workforce and more complex operational structure, is likely to view collaboration as essential for staying competitive, particularly in areas such as innovation, supply chain management, and market expansion. This divergence highlights how company size, resource availability, and market positioning influence the perceived importance of collaboration. While small firms like Company "S" may focus on self-reliance, larger companies often recognize the advantages of working with others to enhance competitiveness and drive innovation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The conducted interviews provided only limited insights into the precise use of coopetition relations among the companies selected for the study. Notably, the large enterprise, does not exhibit a strong inclination towards engaging in coopetitive actions within the Kępno cluster. Instead, as mentioned, it tends to pursue cooperation (CO) from a position of dominance, driven by specific resource needs. This dominant position allows to collaborate on its own terms, focusing on resource acquisition and strategic partnerships that benefit its broader goals, rather than entering into coopetition with other firms

within the cluster. The tendency of Company to cooperate rather than engage in coopetition may be tied to its size and market influence, which reduces the need for competitive collaboration. As a dominant player, it can access resources through more direct partnerships or internal developments without having to balance competitive dynamics with cooperation. This approach contrasts with smaller or medium-sized firms, which might be more inclined to use coopetition as a way to leverage shared resources, knowledge, or market opportunities. The interviews suggest that Company prefers to maintain clear boundaries in its cooperative efforts, focusing on gaining advantages through its existing market power rather than engaging in more complex relationships that blend cooperation and competition, as would be seen in coopetition. The unstable coopetition dynamic likely reflects the company's mid-sized market position, where it must frequently adjust its strategies and relationships to stay competitive while simultaneously engaging in cooperation to enhance its capabilities and market presence. Thus, while Company maintains a more straightforward cooperative approach, Company operates in a more complex coopetitive environment, balancing cooperation and competition to a greater extent, particularly in response to its need for innovation and flexibility. This distinction underscores the varying strategies that companies within the same cluster can adopt, depending on their market position, resource needs, and organizational priorities. It is important to acknowledge that the case analysis presented has certain limitations, typically related to the interpretation of data. Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, data interpretation can sometimes be subjective, particularly when relying on qualitative methods such as interviews. Although the interview technique used in this study was structured, emotional elements or personal biases from the respondents may still influence the findings. This subjectivity is a common challenge in qualitative research. However, the results of prior research help mitigate these risks by narrowing the scope of interpretational freedom, thereby adding a layer of reliability to the conclusions drawn. Another interesting observation from this analysis is the tendency to classify any territorial grouping of firms as a cluster, without thoroughly analyzing the crucial processes of cooperation and coopetition that are fundamental to genuine clusters. Simply grouping firms together geographically does not automatically qualify them as a cluster, unless there is clear evidence of collaborative dynamics and competitive interactions among the firms. Overlooking this distinction could lead to incorrect classifications, which may skew future studies or misinform policy recommendations aimed at fostering industrial clusters. This potentially flawed tendency raises an important area for future research. Studies could focus on distinguishing between genuine clusters and mere geographic concentrations of firms by investigating the presence of both cooperation and competition. Understanding these dynamics in greater depth would contribute to more accurate cluster identification and provide a clearer foundation for supporting economic development through coopetition and innovation within clusters.

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