

The Influence of A Dyadic Coopetitive Relationship on The Surrounding Network

INTRODUCTION

Coopetition, or simultaneous cooperation and competition between firms (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996; Bengtsson and Kock, 2000, 2014), has recently received increasing interest both from a research and practical perspective (Bengtsson, Eriksson and Wincent, 2010; Bengtsson and Kock, 2014; Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson and Kock, 2014; Velu, 2016; Vanyushyn *et al.*, 2018; Czakon *et al.*, 2020). There are streams of research focusing on the benefits of coopetition (e.g. Ritala, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen and Blomqvist, 2009; Pellegrin-Boucher, Le Roy and Gurău, 2013; Gnyawali and Madhavan, 2001; Tsai, 2002) and on the challenges of coopetition (Tidström, 2014; Tidström, Ritala and Lainema, 2018). However, the benefits and challenges are analysed from the perspective of the focal actors in the coopetitive relationship.

This is also a general observation of coopetition research that often focus on dyadic coopetition (Mariani, 2016; Sanou, Le Roy and Gnyawali, 2016). Only a few studies (e.g. Peng and Bourne, 2009; Song and Lee, 2012) focus on coopetition from a network perspective. Scholars have recently called for research on coopetition from a network perspective (Bengtsson, Eriksson and Wincent, 2010; Park, Srivastava and Gnyawali, 2014; Lascaux, 2020). Our study replies to this call by aiming to analyse the positive and negative influence of dyadic coopetitive relationships on the actors of surrounding networks. The empirical part of the study is based on qualitative case study research within the Automotive industry including five dyads of coopetition between European and Chinese companies including their surrounding network of suppliers and distributors. The findings of the study contribute to existing coopetition literature particularly by shedding light on coopetition from a network perspective.

The study is structured as follows. First, coopetition is presented from the perspective of benefits and drawbacks, and thereafter literature on a network view of coopetition is presented. Next, methodology is outlined, followed by a presentation of the empirical findings. The paper ends with conclusions and suggestions for future research.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS RELATED TO COOPETITION

The benefits of coopetition have been evidenced by a growing amount of empirical research (Czakon and Czernek, 2016). According to Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996), firms cooperate to firstly make a bigger cake and compete afterwards for sharing a larger slice of the cake. Firms in coopetitive relationships complement each other by increasing market size (Czakon and Czernek, 2016), reaching niche markets or developing new markets (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). Through cooperation, competitors are able to enlarge customer groups and create new value for customers (Sanou, Le Roy and Gnyawali, 2016), which result in sales increase (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996; Gnyawali and Park, 2011; Ritala, 2012) and market performance enhancement (Sanou, Le Roy and Gnyawali, 2016). Peng and Bourne (2009) suggest the intensive competition in coopetitive relations forces competitive actors to cooperate for gaining great market power and competitive advantage (Park, Srivastava and Gnyawali, 2014), benchmark (Tsai, 2002) and monitor each other on competitive behaviours (Clarke-Hill, Li and Davies, 2003), which improves their competitive positions in the industry (Ritala, Golnam and Wegmann, 2014).

Another often discussed benefit of coopetition is related to resource access and utilization (Czakon and Czernek, 2016). In a coopetitive business relationship, companies can combine resources for increasing the efficiency of resource utilization (Czakon and Czernek, 2016), which facilitates possibilities of competing against rivals outside the coopetitive relationships

(Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). Coopetition also provides access to information and knowledge (Gnyawali and Madhavan, 2001; Sampson, 2007), which potentiate innovation capability (Quintana-García and Benavides-Velasco, 2004; Gassmann, 2006; McCutchen, Swamidass and Teng, 2008; Gnyawali and Park, 2011; Lew and Sinkovics, 2013) in product, service and technology development (Wu, 2012, 2014), process innovation and quality control (Luo, 2005). However, coopetition is also challenging (Czakon and Czernek, 2016). It is a challenge for competitors to share knowledge with and to trust a former competitor (Sanou, Le Roy and Gnyawali, 2016). As a result, less availability and higher costs may be encountered when accessing, acquiring and utilizing the resources (Vanyushyn *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, focal firms in coopetition may act opportunistically (Gnyawali and Park, 2009). International coopetition may enlarge the challenges because of geographical and cultural distances (Vanyushyn *et al.*, 2018).

Summing up, it is possible to say that existing studies on benefits and challenges of coopetition is related to the focal firms in a dyad. There is a lack of studies focusing on benefits and challenges of coopetition from a network perspective.

RESEARCH ON COOPETITION FROM A NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

The actor school (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) views coopetition not limited to the interactions between dyads but as a context at a network level (Rusko, 2014), in which the focus is the cooperation and competition among actors (e.g., Damayanti, Scott and Ruhanen, 2017). The “value net” concept was introduced by Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) for the context-based network coopetition. The concept involves multiple actors and their interactions in the same value chain (Ritala, Golnam and Wegmann, 2014), or the entire value network (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996), and aims at generating collective value despite the current or potential competition between participants (Rusko, 2014).

Network coopetition offers participating firms access to diversified information, knowledge and similar resources (Gnyawali and Madhavan, 2001) as there are more firms in networks and their resource profiles are different too (Sanou, Le Roy and Gnyawali, 2016). The availability of such multiple resources is often limited within a single firm or dyadic relationships. Network coopetition provides participating firms with opportunities in acquiring better information and resources that could be used for knowledge-sharing, market expansion and technological processing (Bengtsson, Eriksson and Wincent, 2010; Dahl, 2014). Firms in network coopetition may particularly obtain radical technological development due to the cooperation with multiple partners wherein dyadic coopetition is suggested to be more suitable for incremental improvements (Yami and Nemeh, 2014). Having direct access to several actors from the same industry enables firms to benchmark themselves and their competitor-partners in terms of strategic actions, market positions and technology development (Sanou, Le Roy and Gnyawali, 2016) that provide competitive advantage to better withstand technological and environmental shocks in their industries (Hagedoorn and Schakenraad, 1994; Zaheer and Zaheer, 1997). Furthermore, a “chain reaction” mechanism is recognised that may allow firms to further exploit the relational network of the coopetitive partners to create new links (Della Corte and Sciarelli, 2012).

The value net introduced by Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) consists of focal firms and their customers, suppliers, and complementors, which makes supply chain an important stream for network coopetition research (Rusko, 2011). Supply chain scholars have embraced and identified coopetition as a desirable buyer–supplier relationship (Klein, Rai and Straub, 2007; Nair, Narasimhan and Bendoly, 2011). Coopetition is argued to be an efficient strategy to

create value among participants in supply chain (Kafi and Fatemi Ghomi, 2014). A simplified depiction of such network cooperation is a triadic buyer-supplier relationship particularly in the form of one buyer and two suppliers (Choi and Wu, 2009; Pathak, Wu and Johnston, 2014). The buyer is considered to be able to exert cooperative influence on its two suppliers. On one hand, the buyer can reduce the conflict between the rival suppliers by requesting their collaboration on e.g. product development; on the other hand, the buyers can also stimulate the competition between suppliers by requesting lower price or higher quality in their product supply (Wu, Choi and Rungtusanatham, 2010). The cooperative network can be further enlarged by collaborating with competing buyers in the same industry and their suppliers and the buying power between buyers and suppliers becomes more dynamic (Peng and Bourne, 2009). Therefore, network cooperation, compared to dyadic cooperation, involves more actors and becomes more complex in cooperative setting (Czaron and Czernek, 2016), which deserves additional attentions from academics.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH APPROACH

The empirical part of our study is based on qualitative case study research, which is recommended by several cooperation scholars (e.g. Wilhelm, 2011; Bouncken *et al.*, 2015; Basterretxea, Charterina and Landeta, 2019; McGrath, O'Toole and Canning, 2019) for exploring the highly complex nature of cooperation.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The automotive industry has been pointed out as a suitable industry for studying cooperation beyond a dyad (Wilhelm, 2011). Therefore we have chosen five cases of dyads of cooperative relationships between European and Chinese automotive manufacturers. All cases focus on technology transfer from Europe to China and are realised by forming joint-venture entities (JVs) in China, which is suggested to be the preferred form in technological cooperation due to its high sophistication and volatility (Hung and Chang, 2012). All cases have a history of at least 10 years of cooperation.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The empirical material has been gathered through the use of various methods. In total, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 informants from the cases. The length of the interviews was between 45 minutes and 2 hours, which is suggested to be appropriate time for collecting rich data (Cooper and Schindler, 2006). We also used secondary data from the companies included in the cases, such as business plans and internal project reports. Considering the sensitivity of cooperating with competitors, anonymity was granted to all companies and interviewees.

In the analysis of the empirical material, the interview transcripts constituted the primary source of data that was analyzed thematically. Other written material was used as secondary data in order to confirm the information received from the interviews.

FINDINGS

DIRECT CORRELATION BETWEEN LOCALISATION PROCESS AND SUPPLYING NETWORKS

All five dyadic cooperative relationships are realised through the formation of JVs in China in order to transfer technological solutions from European companies to the JVs. The success of the transferring, in a large extent, depends on the quality of product components.

Case 2 shows a fact that the entire sets of product components rely on importing from the suppliers of European firm (Supplying-Network 1) from the beginning of JV. The reason is that Supplying-Network 1 is familiar with the components and they have long cooperative experiences with European firm so that the quality of supplied components is secured. To localize the imported components aims at lowering the costs; but a step-by-step learning curve is required from the local suppliers of JV (Supplying-Network 3) in terms of matching the quality of imported ones.

'We start with CKD sets. They are from Europe at the beginning to guarantee it's the quality we want. Expectation and training are provided to local suppliers, because we want them to do it correctly and then reduce the cost'.

Case 4 demonstrates a transition of suppliers from European ones to local ones in China. Before the localized components can be used for replacing the imported ones, the purchasing demands from JV result in an increase of sales for Supplying-Network 1, which is a positive influence from dyadic competition to the Supplying-Network 1.

'We prepared a big volume for them (supplier of European company) before we find good suppliers in China'.

The transition of suppliers starts when JV establishes its own supplying network (Supplying-Network 3) including the integration of many suppliers of the Chinese firm (Supplying-Network 2). A critical requirement from JV to the Supplying-Network 2 on the localization of components is to match the quality level with the imported components by upgrading the existing technical capability. The upgrades may include the improvement from both hardware and software, such as engineering, designing, machinery, training and documentation. The upgrading process typically requires the engagement with additional human and financial resources that are costs may not be indemnified by JV if the volume of order from the JV could not reach the level of breakeven point. The risk step negatively affects the Supplying-Network 2 by dragging the investment that may not be transformed into profit. However, the influence on Supplying-Network 2 turns from negative to positive when the investment on upgrading is paid off by the increasing profit of orders from JV.

'They (supplier of Chinese company) appointed new manager, updated tools. They are serious to be our suppliers. It is really important to follow our standard'.

Case 3 shares a similar experience in the development of local suppliers. It requires effort from Supplying-Network 2 for learning the expertise needed to supply the components with acceptable quality. Once they are on the right direction, the improvement of quality is progressing quickly.

'It was a challenge for them (supplier of Chinese company) to supply the right products. They were not expert in some of the products. It took time and effort to have what we want...The quality (from local suppliers) is improving fast'.

During the transition of suppliers from European suppliers to Chinese suppliers, the impact on European suppliers from dyadic competition is transformed from positive to neutral due to the decline of orders from JV to Supplying-Network 1. Case 1 presents that the dependence on Supplying-Network 1 is shifting to Supplying-Network 3 not only because of the improved quality in components supplied by Supplying-Network 2, but also related to the quickly growing Supplying-Network 3, in which many new qualified local suppliers introduced by the Chinese firm.

'We are able to rely on local suppliers in a fairly short time...They (Chinese firm) introduced many good suppliers. It shortened our time in localization'.

Case 5 further illustrates a negative influence on the Supplying-Network 1 arising from the localization. The cost advantage and approved quality of localization triggers a reverse-import mechanism from China back to Europe. European firm orders components from Supplying-Network 3 directly or via JV. The reverse-import reduces the traditional sales from Supplying-Network 1 to European firm. Put it differently, the dyadic competitive relationships negatively

influence on the supplying network of European firm when the localization meets the point to be able to replace the import from Supplying-Network 1; simultaneously, Supplying-Network 2 benefit from such change between Supplying-Network 1 and the European firm by complementing the reduced orders.

'We have been importing component from China for our product for many years. Supplying from China to our global sales is important'.

In short, to produce in the newly formed JVs impacts on the upstream supplying networks of both European and Chinese cooperative firms.

CHANGE IN THE ORIGIN OF PRODUCTS IN CHINA AFFECTS DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS

The products of all five European firms had been manufactured in Europe and exclusively sold through the distributors of the European firms (Distribution-Network 1) from Europe in China. The distributors of Distribution-Network 1 were fully responsible for the marketing, sales and service activities of the agreed European-origin products in China. After the establishment of JVs, the majority of the products for the Chinese market have been manufactured in China by JVs. Only a few products are still by exception sold as imported products. Case 1 explains the necessity of having a local production and local distributors in China. The logic behind the arrangement of local production is to reach the optimum profit level by avoiding import duty and reaching economies of scale. The few excepted import models are usually with small volume and high profit margin, which is difficult to appropriate the same value if produced locally in JV.

'We want to have volume, so we have to produce in China. Export is only for small quantity and expensive models'.

It is critical for JV, as a newly established company, to utilize the existing distribution network of the Chinese firm to enter the local market. The Distributor-Network 1 has been concentrating on selling specific premium products with a small quantity, which is not an appropriate major sales channel for the products of large quantity. On the other hand, the existing distributors of the Chinese firm may not be experienced in selling premium products from Europe, but they are known to local customers and capable of selling products in China for a larger quantity. To select some qualified distributors of the Chinese firm (Distribution-Network 2) is a realistic starting point for JV to enter into the Chinese market and establish own distribution network (Distribution-Network 3).

'To develop your own network (distributor of European company) for starting up in China is almost impossible. So you have to plug them into an established network...Especially in China, you can't just entre a sector and expect to sell. You have to become known; you have to have credibility. I think the credibility of the sales force from local partner is absolutely crucial'.

Case 3 indicates two sides of having the major products manufactured in China for Distribution-Network 1. From one point of view, a positively impact on Distribution-Network 1 emerges because the distributors are also a part of Distribution-Network 3 that allows them selling JV products to potentially reach a higher volume of sales due to the reduced costs from the production of JV. From the other point of view, Distribution-Network 1 loses the exclusive distribution right on the products from the European firm. The privilege of being an exclusive distributor has provided Distribution-Network 1 with full control of the sales in China and high bargaining power against the manufacturer – European firm. Being a part of Distribution-Network 3 and sharing the sales of products with other local distributors, the bargaining power shifts from Distribution-Network 1 towards European firm.

'They (distributor of European company) are motivated to sell local products with higher volume'.
'After our joint-venture, they (distributor of European company) are no longer the only one sell our product in China'.

Case 2 also reveals the loss of privilege for Distribution-Network 1 on the products from European firm. Furthermore, a challenge also exists for Distribution-Network 2 related to a requirement of upgrading their knowledge, customer relations and after-sales systems on the new products that are different than what they usually sell.

'They (Distribution-Network 1) are a part of the new network with locally ones. They are equally treated in order to continue selling the product in China'.

'The product is more sophisticated than they (Distribution-Network 2) have before. Some training is necessary'.

Case 4 further shows the benefit of integrating Distribution-Network 2 into the Distribution-Network 3. The knowledge of local market allows Distribution-Network 2 positioning JV products on the right track approaching to potential customers. The Distribution-Network 2, vice versa, gains benefits of selling JV products. They are allowed to continue selling products from the Chinese firm as long as the products are not competing with JV products. It means the product portfolio is larger and covering wider customer groups. In addition, customers are familiar with the quality and performance of the similar products previously imported from Europe. A higher sales margin is achieved due to the high recognition on the quality of the products.

'They (distributor of Chinese company) really understand the market, they are going to identify those segments, and direct you in the right place. I think it is really important'.

'The (European) product is well-known by customers. We (distributor of Chinese company) don't need to explain it'.

Case 5 strengthens the recognition on the quality of the products from customers and the positive influence on Distribution-Network 1 to sell JV products in China.

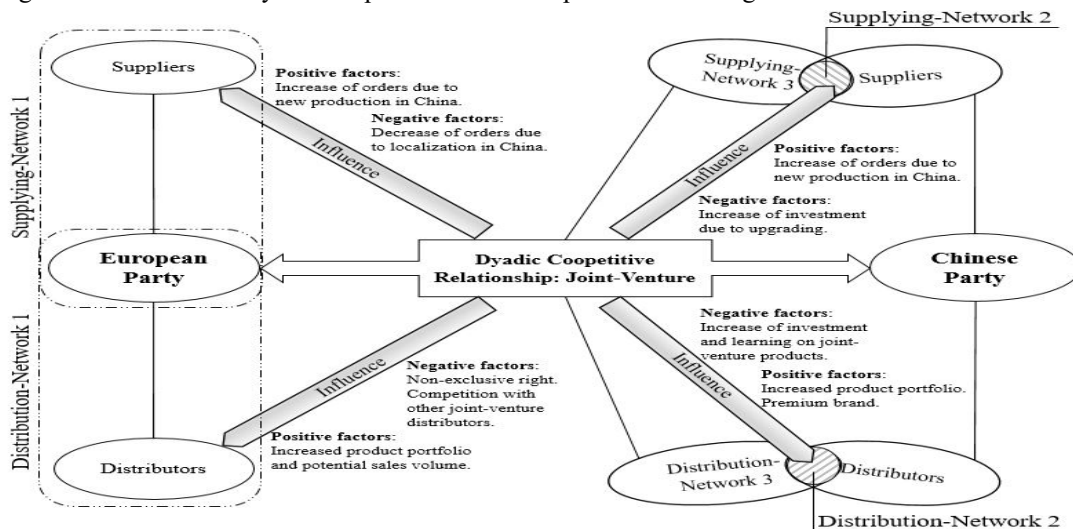
'Our (European company) customers are serious. Our product is sold to officers and used by them for performing public duties. They know our brand, the value of our brand'.

'From our joint venture, they (distributor of European company) can bring the same quality product to customers with cheaper price. It is easier to compete'.

To sum up, to manufacture the products of European firms in JVs in China influences European firms and their distributors, and the distributors of Chinese firms from different aspects.

The findings of the empirical study are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Influence of a dyadic cooperative relationships on surrounding networks of actors.



DISCUSSION

Our study contributes to existing competition research by increasing knowledge of how the activities in a dyad influence the surrounding networks of suppliers and distributors. In comparison with existing competition literature focusing on positive and negative issues of

cooperation (Gnyawali and Madhavan, 2001; Tsai, 2002; Ritala and Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, 2009; Pellegrin-Boucher, Le Roy and Gurău, 2013; Tidström, 2014; Tidström, Ritala and Lainema, 2018; M. Crick, 2019), the findings of this study show that both positive and negative impacts exist in cooperative relationships and such existence can also be dynamic. The change of component orders depending on the degree of localization affect suppliers in Europe and China in a contrary manner. The high requirements on assuring the quality of components stimulate the increase of orders to the suppliers in Europe but challenge the suppliers in China when the joint-venture starts to localize; the effect is reversed, i.e. positive influence takes effect on the suppliers in China and negatively influence the suppliers in Europe, since the requirements of quality and quantity in localized components are satisfied. Current literature on cooperation from a network perspective has stressed cooperation between suppliers and buyers at the upstream supply chain (Wu, Choi and Rungtusanatham, 2010; Wilhelm, 2011). Compared with this, the findings of our study indicate that cooperation can emerge at both upstream and downstream of the supply chain. Distributors from both dyads of a dyadic cooperative relationship cooperate in promoting the local manufactured products in China and compete in sharing the sales of the products.

CONCLUSION

The findings of our study contribute to cooperation research by shedding new light on positive and negative aspects of cooperation from a network perspective. It is apparent from our findings that activities and interaction occurring within a dyad influences the surrounding networks of suppliers and distributors both positively and negatively. Our study is based on a context of internationalization and cooperation between European and Chinese companies within the automotive industry in China. An interesting reflection based on the findings is that activities within these dyads also from a dynamic and process perspective influence supplying- and distribution-network activities, which again influence other activities in these networks either positively or negatively.

In the next version of this article, we will particularly pay more attention to the dynamic aspect of how activities influence each other over time, as well as more clearly relying on the empirical context of internationalization in China that has not yet been explored in cooperation research. Moreover, it would be beneficial to interview representatives from suppliers and distributors.

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