

Coopetition during times of crisis

A qualitative study on how organizations integrated and benefited from using coopetition as business strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Preface

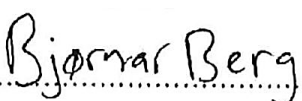
This paper was written as a final thesis in the master's programme in Business and Administration at the School of Business and Law at the University of Agder.

We have experienced the writing of the thesis to be educational and nourishing, but also at times frustrating and challenging. The study has given us a platform of knowledge and insights into the enormous impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the world and in terms of what it has meant for cooperation as organizational strategy. Our competence in conducting research has had a steep learning curve throughout the writing of this thesis.

We would like to thank everyone who have helped us on our way to finishing the master thesis. It would not be possible without the support of our closest family and friends. A special gratitude goes to our supervisor Andreas Erich Wald, at the Department of Management at University of Agder. His feedback and guidelines have been most helpful and have contributed to raising the quality of the thesis.

We hope our study can be valuable for further research and understanding of cooperation as business strategy, by highlighting the effects of cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kristiansand, 01. June 2022


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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine how organizations integrate and use coopetition as strategy during times of crisis and how it potentially differs from normal circumstances. Despite much research in the topic of coopetition there was a lack of previous research literature that examines how coopetition is affected during market crises. Our inspiration for our thesis initially came from an article by Crick and Crick (2020) which suggested that due to the lack of sound research on the topic of coopetition during times of crisis, businesses might get into such relationships without enough knowledge, which can possibly lead to grave consequences.

In conducting the research, we chose to utilize a qualitative approach to better understand the intricacies and complexity of coopetition. To collect the data, we did semi-structured interviews with managers about their organization's strategy and experience with cooperative relationships. The data sample ended up being five interview objects in different industries. The data was then systematically categorized in themes by antecedents and consequences, systematically analyzed and then compared to earlier study findings of coopetition explored in the literature review.

The main findings in this master thesis suggest that some antecedents and consequences played a key role in cooperative relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably did *flexibility* as consequence from coopetition make the organizations better suited to withstand and quickly adapt to the impact of the *volatile market circumstances* during the pandemic. This flexibility was achieved primarily by *sharing workforce* and *reducing costs* in collaboration with competitors. In regard to antecedents of coopetition, our study shows that multiple key drivers of coopetition were present during the pandemic, suggesting that the crisis generated new cooperative agreements in the business market. Multiple of the interviewed organizations in the study reported about positive experience from using coopetition as strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The small sample size of in the study harms the generalizability of the study, but we still believe that the observations and conclusions in our thesis is a contribution to the narrow field of coopetition during crisis and could be a good starting point for future research on the topic.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over 2000 years ago, in ancient Rome, landholders who lent out money to merchants of maritime goods, found that it was too perilous due to high levels of defection, scams and other malicious acts. Caton, a senator and landholder, found a way to diversify his risk but still get the remunerative returns of lending. He invented collective loans, which was a loan to a society of merchants and ships. The borrowers had to gather 50 merchants and 50 ships to get approved for their collective loan (Wilson, 2012). This constellation created cooperation between these competitors through the common loan they had taken out. This reportedly also worked well as a social pressure on the individual merchants to be sincere and pay on time. The loans had a high and fixed rate and allowed the borrowers to purchase their product and pay off the credit after these were sold. The merchants also cooperated on the freight of the goods as piracy and other perils of the sea or road were common in ancient Rome (Le Roy & Mira, 2018). Coopetition, even though it wasn't named, was a central part of trade in the Roman Empire.

During times of crisis businesses are forced to adjust to their current circumstances. Coopetition is a strategy available to businesses who are struggling to cope with the pressures of fulfilment, customer base decreasing etc. In times of crisis there is likely more competitors willing to try unconventional strategies to survive, where one might have a better chance of finding a coopetition partner or multiple. In normal times businesses are on their own journey where some businesses might find it beneficial to form a coopetition, but many businesses become stale and are unwilling to try unconventional methods to thrive.

1.1 Background and relevance

Coopetition is a highly relevant topic and which is also true the COVID-19 pandemic which has been roaming the globe since 2020. Crick and Crick (2020) wrote an article called «Coopetition and COVID-19: Collaborative business-to-business marketing strategies in a pandemic crisis». The article indicates that coopetition strategies are on the rise during the pandemic but lacks research on the topic. We wanted to research whether businesses were experiencing the effects of COVID-19 on their coopetition strategies. Either through new coopetitions emerging and pre-existing coopetitions dissolving or changing. Crick and Crick (2020) state that the rise in coopetition strategies in the private and public sector with the surge of the pandemic is a highly under-researched subject which needs more research to

uncover the potential benefits and dangers of it. There are great amounts of existing literature on both cooperation and the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises, but not much mentions those together. We want to research the antecedents and consequences of cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic both to increase the pre-existing knowledge around antecedents and consequences of cooperation, but above all to widen the knowledge when it comes to cooperation in a crisis setting. This led us down the path to the following research questions:

RQ1: *Did formation and continuation of cooperation change with the COVID-19 outbreak?*

RQ2: *Can cooperation strategies utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic benefit in a post-pandemic setting?*

We hope that the research will be helpful for future research on the topic as well as for organizations considering cooperation as a strategy or who already are in a cooperation agreement, so they can make an informed decision. It is inevitable that other global crises will emerge in the future. Therefore, it is vital to study and be prepared for it.

1.2 Structure of the paper

In chapter one, we introduced the theme and problem statement, while giving insights into the background and relevance of the topic. In chapter two we present the existing literature on the topics of cooperation and COVID-19, to summarize what has been written before and provide a knowledge base to build the thesis upon. In chapter three we describe the methodological approach chosen to best conduct our research in a reliable way. In chapter four we present the results of our interviews by going through each interview individually to make sure the relevant information and context is captured. Chapter five discusses the results in chapter four and gives interpretations of the results in light of the pre-existing theory. Lastly, chapter six concludes the paper and addresses the implications and limitations of our research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter aims to give insight into the theory of coopetition as a business strategy and explain how it can be used during times of crisis. We will introduce and present some of the key existing theory on coopetition, as well as explaining why one might expect coopetition during times of crisis to be different than coopetition during stable business market conditions. We will also briefly define the term competition and highlight some main elements of the COVID-19 pandemic and explain why the pandemic presented us a good opportunity to study coopetition under times of crisis. Additionally, we will look at some cases where coopetition has been used as a strategy.

2.1 Introduction to coopetition

Coopetition is a portmanteau of competition and cooperation. It is a phenomenon that has been around for a long time but wasn't recognized until originally coined by Raymond J. Noorda in the 1980s (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016), before Adam M. Brandenburger and Barry J. Nalebuff conceptualized the idea when they wrote the book named "Co-opetition" in 1996. Before 1996 there were significant instances of cooperation that would be called coopetition. In fact, the mission of the moon landing almost became a case of coopetition in the 1960s when US President Kennedy proposed to Soviet's Khrushchev that they should cooperate to land on the moon (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 2021).

Coopetition is a business strategy aimed at collaboration with competitors to solve a common problem. There are multiple forms in which coopetition can take place, but the most common type is complementing competitors, where the companies are in a similar market, but by combining their products or services they both get a better end-product. Software and hardware companies are textbook examples of this. As such, back when Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) wrote their book on coopetition they used the example of Windows 95 being more valuable when installed on an Intel Pentium-powered machine rather than on a 486 machine, and the Pentium chip will in turn be more valuable when paired with Windows 95.

There have been many forms of conceptualizing coopetition that has been studied, these include value-net (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996), dyadic relationship (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000), paradox (Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, & Kock, 2014), business model (Ritala, Golnam, & Wegmann, 2014) and ecosystem (Daidj & Jung, 2011). These conceptualizations also have

different levels such as networks, dyadic, triadic, and intra-firm levels (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). In other words, coopetition can be used in a horizontal or vertical way. Two pure competitors could form a coopetition where both have the same service or product and similar markets. This might be a coopetition between two accounting firms for example. There are also coopetitions where a supplier is also a competitor that is collaborating with a store for example. Sporting goods stores are typical examples of this where they might acquire their goods from manufacturers such as Nike, Adidas, etc., all the while Nike directly sells to consumers at the same time. The forms of coopetition strategies are endless, but there are two requirements that needs to be present for an coopetition agreement to exist between units; (1) There needs to be a form of collaboration, and (2) there needs to be competitive elements involved which make them competitors. Bengtsson and Kock (2014) defines it 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 interactions”.

2.1.1 Competitors

In Oxford Languages English dictionary, which supplies Google with English dictionary, the definition of competition is “*the activity or condition of striving to gain or win something by defeating or establishing superiority over others*”. The words defeating and establishing superiority sound harsh, but in essence it means that two or more parties are striving to gain or win something that can’t be shared. The Oxford English dictionary gives multiple definitions whereas the original definition of competition is “*The action of endeavoring to gain what another endeavors to gain at the same time*” by Johnson (Dictionary, 2021). While their definition of the word in a sense of commerce translates to “*Rivalry in the market, striving for custom between those who have the same commodities to dispose of*” (Dictionary, 2021). The defining characters of competition from these definitions is that two or more parties are trying to achieve a common goal that cannot be shared. A competitor is defined as “*One who competes, or engages in a competition; one who seeks an object in rivalry with others also seeking it; a rival*” (Dictionary, 2022).

2.1.2 Literature search

Before we could conduct a study on coopetition during times of crisis, we needed to gain extensive knowledge about coopetition. This allows the collection of data to be more refined

and relevant, as well as making the analysis of data more sophisticated and accurate. In the end this makes the final product of our thesis to be more trust-worthy, as well as more reliable as a foundation for further research in the future. It is not practical nor relevant to cover all possible aspects of coopetition in detail, instead we highlight the most influential literature of the topic as well as literature that is of importance to this study. The examined literature is then systemized in this literature review section for an overview of the topic of coopetition.

In the acquisition of literature, we did online searches for articles on the webservice Google Scholar. We systematically searched for articles by combining, isolating, or excluding keywords and terms. Recurring keywords were such as: “Coopetition,” “co-opetition,” “crisis,” “collaboration” and “COVID-19”. To our curiosity, we found more studies regarding competition than expected with thousands of results, but very few that regarded competition in market crisis conditions. However, we did find some recently published articles that suggested future studies should be done on coopetition during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that our thesis subject have some relevance. We decided that we had sufficient literature when we reached a point of information saturation, without the literature review being unnecessary detailed or lengthy.

There are some author such as Adam M. Brandenburger, Barry J. Nalebuff, Maria Bengtsson, Sören Kock, Tatbeeq Raza-Ullah, James M. Crick and Dave Crick that are repeatedly referenced in the literature review, but as they are considered to be at the forefront of coopetition research this should not harm the quality or reliability of the literature review.

2.2 Consequences of coopetition

Like most other business strategies, coopetition has its advantages and shortcomings. The goal is that the positives of a chosen strategy outweigh the negatives, therefore it is important to know ahead of choosing strategy, what the probable balance of positive and negative is. It is impossible to foresee all future scenarios so entering a coopetition is a tough business decision to make as the strategy itself is littered with potential pitfalls, but managers choose to do it still because of the potentially great benefits from it (Cygler, Sroka, Solesvik, & Dębkowska, 2018). Due to complexity in the environment, which might for example be caused by a global pandemic, many companies find coopetition to be an advantageous method to secure survival and sustainability (Cygler et al., 2018). The consequences of coopetition

can be classified in four categories called innovation, knowledge related, firm performance and relational consequences (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016).

2.2.2 Advantages of coopetition

The first advantage of coopetition is innovation. The innovation process is dramatically intensified through coopetition because the paradoxical relationship of competition which pressure the firm to innovate and collaboration through sharing of knowledge to better innovate (B.-J. Park, M. Srivastava, & D. Gnyawali, 2014a). There are both studies that point to innovation performance strengthening through coopetition (B.-J. Park, M. K. Srivastava, & D. R. Gnyawali, 2014b), and those who argue against, which state that coopetition could have grave consequences for innovation (Quintana-García & Benavides-Velasco, 2004). In coopetitions which are in different countries write a different story as the coopetitors aren't necessarily in the same geographical market they can help each other without the worry of giving a direct competitor too much help. It gives the companies more playing room to give resources to their partner. Due to the resources not being as sensitive as in a local coopetition where one is striving to accommodate the exact same market. International coopetition relationships have been found to increase the likelihood of new-to-market innovations (Vanyushyn, Bengtsson, Näsholm, & Boter, 2018).

The second category of advantages from coopetition is knowledge related consequences. This refers to knowledge sharing, knowledge creation and knowledge acquisition through coopetition (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). When firms collaborate in acquiring new knowledge it creates value which is then used in competition (Song & Lee, 2012). Interestingly, Y. Liu, Luo, Yang, and Maksimov (2014) argue that knowledge sharing is more prevalent in coopetitions that are predominately competition-based, while knowledge sharing is lower in cooperation-dominated coopetitions.

The third category involves general firm performance. This relates to measures like economic performance, increasing profits or strengthening market position. Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) suggested that the game-theoretic benefit of growing the pie before of dividing it is a benefit of coopetition. This happens because two or more firms in cahoots will be able to share resources and cut costs while creating a bigger applicable market. Paradoxically the firms also must focus on their own products and services to increase their market share of this increasing market. This relates closely to the benefit of strengthening market position together

against common competitors. Companies can increase their combined market share through collaboration on innovation, marketing, or production. If these companies can collaborate efficiently they can both come out stronger than their common competition (Cygler et al., 2018). It is important to handle such situations delicately to avoid envy and sabotage, because that might cause both companies to sabotage each other more than they would in a normal competition setting and hurt both parties. Another benefit relating to firm performance is if one of the parties has something that could be an asset for their competitors but is currently a liability for themselves. For example, machines that can produce larger amounts of product than the company is able to sell. The upkeep and costs of these could be offset by leasing them or producing extra products for their competitor to sell. This will benefit the company needing to pay for their liabilities as well as benefitting the company in need of machines to produce their goods. This is one of the ways cooperation can result in cost reductions, for one or all parties, while providing additional value (Cygler et al., 2018). Cygler et al. (2018) found that the most frequent benefit of cooperation was cost reduction, whereas 51% of the respondents said that their cooperation strategy helped to cut costs. The second benefit with 36% of respondents reporting of access to new resources as a benefit.

The fourth and last category is the relational consequences which are important for all of the above to work. Trust and mutual respect is essential for being able to have a cooperation relationship (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). Ketchen Jr, Snow, and Hoover (2004) argue that positive relational consequences are essential to sustain to gain the other advantages.

Consequences of cooperation

Innovation	Knowledge related	Firm performance	Relational
Radical	Knowledge sharing	Economic	Trust
Incremental	Knowledge creation	Market position	Maintaining relationship
	Knowledge acquisition	Quality	Essential for success in
		Efficiency of resources	other categories

Table 1: Consequences of cooperation

2.2.2 Disadvantages of cooperation

There are also challenges when it comes to cooperation partnerships. One business is inclined to do whatever is best for their business while the other will do what's best for themselves. Because you are essentially working together with your rival there is a high likelihood of some tension building up. The tension can be both time-consuming as well as destructive for

the building of trust in the partnership. Aligning the incentives of both or all partners is the key to a fruitful coopetition.

Knowing that the relationships have a competitive side there are possibilities of opportunistic behavior. This type of behavior occurs more often than in cooperation between non-competitors (Dowling, Roering, Carlin, & Wisnieski, 1996). When coopetitive partners become greedy and want to achieve their own objectives quickly they might find themselves breaking the rules of the partnership. When they do achieve their goals, they stop wanting to cooperate as they have seemingly gotten the value they sought out of the transaction (Cygler et al., 2018). Coopetition also has the danger of creating a game where both parties are working to be the dominant in the relationship. This increases opportunistic behavior and the aggressiveness in the coopetition, resulting in loss of trust between the partners and even extending to the customers (Cygler et al., 2018). Therefore, if done wrong, coopetition can become a competition more than a cooperation which it initially was supposed to be.

Information leaks and leaks of other intangible assets by a coopetitive partner is another risk. Such leaks might have a negative impact on the business, but in the gravest situations it might be detrimental to the company (Cygler et al., 2018). Coopetition is characterized by having more conflict than when non-competitors cooperate. This happens because the juxtaposition of competition and cooperation is a part of the deal.

If coopetition is a central part of the business strategy it might result in losing the ability of independent decision-making. In many types of coopetition strategies contracts are put in place to prohibit the partners of choosing other partners, doing certain marketing activities and other things that might be of harm to their partner (Cygler et al., 2018). Giving up the independence of your decisions is the price of coopetition.

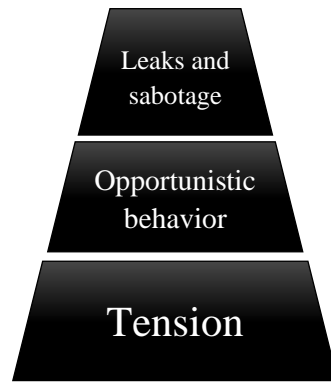


Figure 1: Tension in coopetition

2.3 Antecedents of coopetition

While there is a variety of problems and opportunities that can lead to coopetition partnerships, there are some key drivers that leads to coopetition strategies forming. These drivers can be classified in three over-arching categories: external, relation-specific and internal drivers (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). First, we will present these three factors, then we will proceed to explain how one can decide whether coopetition is a viable strategy for a specific company.

2.3.1 Antecedents

External drivers of coopetition refer to the environmental factors that is imposed on a business at any given point of time. This might be factors such as external stakeholders of the business, demands of technological improvement or innovation to stay relevant. It might also include factors such as the industry growth level (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). Market circumstances are essential, such as how widespread coopetition is in the specific company's market. One needs to have the possibility of finding a coopetition partner for the strategy to form (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000). If an organization is in an industry where coopetition is widely utilized, one needs to be a part of it to be able to compete. Dowling et al. (1996) argues that industries that are regulated and parsimonious are more likely to engage in coopetition. Uncertainty and volatile industries are pushed towards coopetition (Padula & Dagnino, 2007). Lower barriers to entry make it harder for businesses to keep competitive advantage and drags them toward more coopetition (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). The COVID-19 restrictions and pandemic that we are studying is an example of a potential external driver, which we hope to uncover whether it is a driver of coopetition.

Drivers that are relation-specific in nature are associated with the characteristics of the partners and relationships in a coopetition strategy (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). Gnyawali and Park (2011) argue that a firm's preferred coopetition partner has beneficial and better resources that the firm can utilize to achieve their goals. Asymmetry in technology and the potential for bargaining power in the relationship are relation-specific drivers (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). It has been found that the social aspect of coopetition is also a driving force, if one has social contacts in competing firms, having a reciprocal exchange of information and trust is important to have a successful partnership (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016).

The internal drivers of coopetition refer to the internal aspects of a business, such as motives, resources and capabilities (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). Firms can be proactively looking for coopetition strategies or end up getting pushed towards a coopetition as a reaction to bad circumstances (Gnyawali & Park, 2009). Small firms could pursue coopetition due to a lack of key resources, they need a bigger market presence and often rely on narrow product or service lines to a niche customer base (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2012). In Gnyawali and Park's (2011) study of coopetition between large firms based on a case study of Sony and Samsung, they pointed towards a main driver of coopetition strategies being a coopetition-oriented mindset. They claim that the belief managers and employees had surrounding coopetition is one of the main drivers in terms of coopetition partnerships forming.

Key drivers of coopetition		
External drivers	Relation-specific drivers	Internal drivers
External stakeholders	Partner with resources	Coopetition-oriented mindset
Industry growth level	Technological asymmetry	Lack of key resources
Volatility in market	Social aspects	Lack of market presence
Widespread usage of coopetition in industry		Narrow product or service line
More competitive market		

Table 2: Key drivers of coopetition

2.3.2 Considerations to make preceding coopetition

An important factor to look at when a cooperative opportunity is available is to evaluate what each party would do if the opportunity was not seized. An example of this is a company called

Honest Tea who was requested by Safeway supermarkets if they could make a private-label line of organic teas together. This would result in Honest Tea's current sales to Safeway decrease; therefore, the whole spiel would come out unprofitable for Honest Tea. Still, Honest Tea found themselves accepting the pitch. The reason is simple; if they turned down the offer Safeway would just find another supplier to provide them with a tea line. So Honest Tea made the new product line closely relatable in taste to their rival tea maker Tazo, to insure that the new line would compete against Tazo's tea in the Safeway stores instead of competing with their own best sellers (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 2021).

Leading up to cooperation partnerships, one must also analyze whether cooperation is an option creating more value than disfavor. Brandenburger and Nalebuff (2021) framed this in the four categories to assess the potential risk of cooperation. If neither party is risking their "special sauce", but when combining both parties' contribution creates value.

The second category is when both parties have something special and if they share it, they will create a gap to their other competitors. In this case, giving equal "special sauce" to each other is paramount. It is also important to consider the other parts of the service or product. Ford Motor Co and General Motors (GM) decided to cooperate on transmission technologies because one had a better 10-speed transmission and the other had a better nine-speed. This freed both parties up from using labor and money to develop better transmission technologies. On the other hand, GM once turned down a cooperation for developing engines with Ford, because Ford already had the lead when it came to the lightweight chassis of F-150. GM thought having the same engines would give Ford an unassailable lead, because of their advantage in other areas (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 2021).

If one of the organizations is much larger than the other, and cooperation will only increase their power; the inferior party might still want to cooperate. Amazon is the perfect example as they open their marketplace to individual sellers which might take away a lot of direct business for Amazon, but Amazon receives a commission for every sale made on the marketplace. For the sellers they gain access to a huge marketplace where their products are essentially marketed for them (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 2021). This synergy makes Amazon a hub for consumers where they can go to buy anything from tooth paste to a gaming computer. This makes Amazon the central piece of a huge cooperation network.

Lastly, one party might share their “secret sauce” to gain access to their competitors customer base, even if it is risky for both parties. Apple and Samsung are doing this with Samsung’s superior OLED-screens (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 2021). Apple is buying the screens needed to make iPhones from Samsung, which is risky for Apple because they are relying on Samsung to be able to make their phones. On the other hand, it is risky for Samsung because by letting Apple use their screens in Apple phones, they are selling one of their competitive advantages. The deal is still lucrative for both parties because Apple receives very high-end screens without spending money to make the technology themselves while Samsung makes money for every phone Apple sells, even though iPhone sales led to a decrease in Samsung phone sales.

Further, if one has decided to enter a cooperation and analyzed which category of situations leading to cooperation you are in, it is important to structure the agreement in a way that is beneficial. The structure will vary between different cooperation agreements. A form of cooperation that has a low level of risk for both parties will not need as rigid rules for the partnership as if company secrets and the like was shared.

2.4 Cooperation in times of crisis

In times of crisis the organizational environment is unstable and insecure. Often multiple of the drivers of cooperation are present. According to Crick & Crick (2020) the amount of cooperation in the business market has risen considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even competing countries, states or municipalities have engaged in cooperating through contact tracing (Crick & Crick, 2020). The research on implementing cooperation during times of crisis is limited, so the handling of collaboration and competition could be troublesome. This can create uncertainty around the use case of cooperation in such volatile times (Crick & Crick, 2020). Researching these consequences is essential for meeting the next global crisis in a better way.

During the COVID-19 pandemic there are external drivers of cooperation present. The instability touches almost every business in a positive or negative way (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). This strengthens the external drivers and creates an environment where businesses are forced to react. Our goal is to study whether businesses react to the pandemic’s volatility with cooperation strategies and if the pre-existing strategies are affected.

2.5 The COVID-19 pandemic

There can be aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic that are of different level of relevance to other future crises. For this study to be relevant for future research or managerial decisions in upcoming crises, it's important that readers understand what the COVID-19 pandemic was and what impacts it had on the business market. For this reason, we find it necessary to briefly summarize some key aspects of the pandemic.

2.5.1 A short summary of the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 is the short common term for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It is a disease that ranges in severity from mild symptoms to illness and even death. The major characteristics of COVID-19 is its highly potent ability to transport and spread between humans and animals (Esakandari et al., 2020). Typical clinical symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, fatigue and respiratory issues, where the elderly population and people with underlying health issues are particular susceptible to infection and fatal respiratory distress (Guo et al., 2020). The virus origin is unknown, but it was first discovered spreading in Wuhan of the Hubei province of China at the end of December 2019 (Esakandari et al., 2020). One month later by end of January 2020, it was declared by the Worlds Health Organization (WHO) as a public health emergency of international concern (Guo et al., 2020). Over two years later at the time of writing of this study, over 6 million people have been registered deceased as a result of COVID-19 according to the WHO (2022, 30. May). During this time there have been extensive collaboration between governments, academia and the medical industry to develop vaccines at unprecedented speeds, in which they have succeeded (Hogan & Pardi, 2022). There has also been extensively use of “lock-downs” and restrictions on human contact by governments, which are temporary measures aimed at reducing the spread of infection. This has heavily affected everyday life for people, as well as impacted the global economy.

2.5.2 COVID-19 impact on the business market

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in major implications on the global economy. The governmental restrictions and social distancing forced just about all organizations to change practical practices to prevent spreading of the virus, which in turn significantly impacted the financial performance in most sectors and considerably increased the risk in the financial industry (Diab, 2022). Some industries had more dramatic changes

than others such as for example the restaurant and hospitality industries where at times the businesses had to temporarily completely shut down. Arguably no industries have been negatively impacted during the pandemic as hard as this industry where millions lost their jobs. This was partly a result of great decline in tourism and travel, as well as social distancing and governmental restrictions, which ultimately harmed the revenues and financial bottom line (Dube, Nhamo, & Chikodzi, 2021).

Some examples of typical recurring practical COVID-19 measures in businesses were increased hygiene by cleaning, deployment of anti-bac stations, restructuring to home offices for employees, change of production line in manufacturing due to demand shifts, and restrictions in maximum allowance of people in the premises for businesses like retailers or entertainment locations such as cinemas and theatres, bowling alleys, etc. As the governmental restrictions gradually eased during the pandemic, organizations adapted by having capacity guidelines, additional cleaning and other implementations of necessary measures to prevent the disease from spreading (Ntounis, Parker, Skinner, Steadman, & Warnaby, 2022). The chain effect of the low activity in the restaurant industries, resulted in the socio-economic agriculture sector to experience dropping demand, and therefore as well dropping prices and revenue (Nicola et al., 2020). It should be noted that the exact acceleration of progression in the spreading of the virus and the relaxation of governmental restrictions varied between nations and regions worldwide.

2.5.3 Coopetition during the COVID-19 pandemic

As a direct or indirect consequence, the COVID-19 pandemic created numerous coopetition agreements all over the world in various industries. This cause could range on the spectrum from absolute necessary coopetition for business survival, to new emerging opportunities as an outcome of new market demands or revised governmental policies, regulations, and legislations (Crick & Crick, 2020). An example of such change in governmental law was the allowance of pooling of resources in the supermarket chain in 2020 in the United Kingdom. The restriction of pooling exist in normal circumstances to ensure healthy market competition, but as the consumers changed their behavior to stockpiling, which made the supermarket go out of stock on daily groceries, a temporary change of competition rules in the UK allowed for sharing pools of employees, data and stock depots (Ben, 2020, 20. March). Of course, due to the temporary nature, the change of law was later withdrawn setting a stop for further coopetition (Hoare & Wallsten, 2022).

A prime example of fierce competitors going in a cooperation agreement during the pandemic was Apple and Alphabet (parent of Google), two of the top 10 largest companies in the world (Fortune, 2022). The businesses teamed up to create a tracking service application for mobile phones to help preventing the spreading of the coronavirus (Hern & Paul, 2020, 10. April). They did not need each other to create the application itself, but a collaboration or cooperation was needed to overcome the previously very restricted data sharing between Apple and Android (subsidiary company of Google). The application was free and direct profit was not the aim of the cooperation, but the project was rather a contribution to the global humanity, reflecting the businesses Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This also highlights that the objectives of cooperation agreements do not only need to be of direct monetary profit but can also be for example creating value for the society and exchanging and gaining valuable knowledge.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter we will describe our research method process and justify for our approach of methods. The chapter contains the research approach, the research method and research questions, the research design, the data collection method, sampling, and data analysis method.

3.1 The research approach

Our research is conducted by using an empirical scientific method which is a logical and scientific step-by-step process for identifying research problems and performing collection and analysis of data. The method seeks to find objective answers to research questions in a rigorous and organized procedure, to ensure that the subjectivity in the research is suppressed and minimized. The research should hold up to the 8 hallmarks of scientific research: Purposiveness, rigor, replicability, testability, generalizability, objectivity, precision and confidence, and parsimony (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, pp. 18-22). We chose this method not only because it reduces the chance of subjective bias throughout the conduction of the research, but also as it is perceived as the most universally accepted research method in the academic community, and as its structure is familiar to readers of the thesis. As with all empirical studies we cannot capture the authentic state of reality, but our findings are simplified representations of it (Johannessen, Christoffersen, & Tufte, 2011, p. 40).

We apply the most common practice of the scientific research method which is the hypothetico-deductive method. It consists of a seven-step process by identifying a broad problem area, defining the problem statement, hypothesizing, determine measures, data collection, data analysis and interpretation of the data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 23). As the name suggest, the method applies deductive reasoning, which means hypothesis are generated from theory, and then tested to confirm or refute the original theory. The hypothesis must meet the two requirements of being both testable and falsifiable (Sekaran, U., Bougie, R. 2016, p.23). The method is suited for both quantitative and qualitative research. We will be doing qualitative research, hence we will be developing and studying research questions rather than a hypothesis.

Instead of a deductive approach we could also be using an inductive approach. Induction works in the opposite direction of deductive reasoning, which means that a general theory and

hypothesis is generated based on observations of specific phenomena. Deductive process is extensively used in casual and quantitative studies, while inductive process is more often used in qualitative and exploratory research (Sekaran, U., Bougie, R. 2016, p.26). An inductive approach would in terms of research-theory be a better fit for our complex topic of competition, but mainly due to the limited time scope of our thesis it would not be a feasible method. Optimally one would use both inductive and deductive reasoning in a sequential manner by forming a theoretical framework and hypothesis based on interviews (inductive), and then test hypothesis by conducting a quantitative study to confirm or refute the hypotheses (deductive). This would however be best to do in a research project spanning over a longer period than our limited timespan of research.

3.2 The research method and research questions

It is the problem statement consisting of the research objective(s) and research question(s) that determines for what is the most appropriate research method for a study (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 39). The purpose of our research objective is in its most fundamental meaning to expand knowledge in the field of competition in a work setting or business market. The objective seeks to investigate how competition functions during times of crisis, to provide general education on the topic which can be beneficial for organizations in upcoming crises. This makes the research a type of business research. There are two general types of business research; Applied research where the objective is to solve a current problem a manager is facing, and basic or fundamental research which is to generate knowledge to understand and solve problems when they arise in the future (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 5). Our research problem fits best under the latter and is thus a type of basic research, where the research questions must be developed accordingly.

The topic of competition is complex in its nature, due to it essentially being a social economic field where organizational decisions are made by people which are under the influence of subjective emotions and perceptions, as well as irrationality (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 27). There have been done extensive research in the field of competition, especially in qualitative studies, but it is lacking studies that examines competition in crises. A suitable way to perform research is thus to be open-minded and ask broad exploratory research questions. The research will then start out broad but could potentially progressively get narrower as we collect and analyze the data. The limitation off this type of exploratory research questions is

however that the end results may not be very generalizable, but rather a direction or starting point for more explicit research in the future (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 43). This limitation is however true for most studies that conduct research using qualitative methods (Johannessen et al., 2011, p. 110).

Based on the theory examined in the critical literature review and with an exploratory approach, our research questions are then the following:

RQ1: *Did formation and continuation of coopetition change with the COVID-19 outbreak?*

RQ2: *Can coopetition strategies utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic benefit in a post-pandemic setting?*

3.3 The research design

A research design is a plan for the collection, measuring and analyzing of the data, and should be selected with regards to the chosen research questions. There is no design that is universally superior, and as such the design must be carefully selected for each stage of the research (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 96). Our research objective could be reached in more ways than one, through for example descriptive research questions using quantitative method. But as we have settled for a type of broad exploratory research questions, it is most suitable to conduct qualitative research. The reason is that qualitative data collection usually does a better job of capturing intricate details and nuances than quantitative research design which is more dependent on sample size and focused on obtaining measurable statistically data. The qualitative research allows for research subjects to express more freely than for example through a static survey scheme that often are used in quantitative research.

We will be doing research with interviews as our primary data collection method (see section 3.4). The study setting will be uncontrived and the interference between us and the research subjects will not be moderated other than trying to reduce the risk of influencing or manipulate the interview subjects. The unit of analysis will be organizations, and the interviews will then be of managers or types of employees that have extensive knowledge on the organization's strategy and performance. The time horizon of the study will be a one-shot study, meaning that the collection of data will happen just once in a single interview with each unit.

3.4 The data collection method

A data collection method is an integral part of research design as it is the way of how information will be gathered from the original source. In business research the sources of information are often managers, employers, investors, consumers, or other types of business stakeholders. As such the main source are usually people. This makes observation, interviews, and questionnaires the most popular primary data collection methods in business research. But there are also more experimental data collection methods being used such as different types of contrived lab experiments (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 111). As mentioned previously under the research design section we will be doing interviews as our primary method of data collection.

3.4.1 Interview

An interview is a guided and purposeful conversation to collect data. Interviews are widely used in qualitative studies for data collection as it allows for a capturing a great amount of information detail. This is very useful when researching topics where the existing knowledge is low, or the research is unclear or suffers from limitations, or if there is not enough existing theory for development of a theoretical framework (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 43).

Interview is an appropriate data collection method for our study because it fits well with our research questions that are of exploratory nature.

The interviews are semi-structured which means that we are following an interview guideline (see appendix A) to ensure we get into the relevant topics of the study. The guideline is used as a tool to enhance the interview and is not to be followed in a strictly linear fashion as in a structured interview. It does however ensure that we touch on the relevant topics, and that all participants receive and answers the same main questions, which makes handling of data easier later in the research process. The nature of the questions is open-ended and allows the interview participants to express and explain freely but includes follow-up questions to make sure we get answers if the participant answers shortly. No questions were given beforehand the interview, but the topic of the coming interview was made clear for the participants. In the process of recruiting participants (see section 3.5.2) for the interview we informed the participants well about the concept of what a competitor is and what the term coopepetition means. Unsurprisingly, the “coopepetition” term itself was unknown for most of the participants. The interview guideline also includes description of the practical procedure of

the interview and its order of progress, to make sure all the subjects got all the information about their privacy and rights (see section 3.4.2).

The location for the interview were set to whatever the interview subject preferred, which could be in person or a digital interview. There are both advantages and disadvantages of whether the interview is being done in person or online, but generally speaking from a researcher's side, a face-to-face interview is favored, albeit online interviews are often more practical and less time consuming for both the interviewer and the interview subjects (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 123). We conducted one interview online out of convenience for the interviewee, using the video communicating software "Zoom". The remaining interviews were done in person where we met the participants at their respective work offices. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to be able to gather all the important information from the interviews. Opposed to a method of having one interviewer and one notary, where the likelihood of missing key information is higher.

3.4.2 Interview participants privacy and rights

Because we gather personal data, it is necessary to establish a deliberate strategy to protect the privacy and rights of the research subjects and assure that the data collection and storage of data is safe. We have taken several measures to make sure the research is conducted in an ethical way and follows the guidelines from Norsk senter for forskningsdata (NSD), which is a Norwegian state-owned organization that provides guidance and advice for privacy and data management in research (NSD, 2022). Before conducting the research, we sent an application to NSD which contained a thorough explanation of the research objective and how the data will be collected and managed, as well as a copy of the interview guide, and the template for the consent agreement that would be issued to all interview participants. The application was approved (see appendix B).

The consent agreement used for our interviews was based on a template provided by NSD. The agreement included information about the research, and explains precisely and clearly the rights, privacy, and implications of participating in the study. It also included contact information to the researchers, supervisor, and the privacy representative of University of Agder, so the participants can raise any issues they might have regarding the interview or project. A main implementation of assuring safe research is to anonymize sensitive data such as names or other revealing information that can be used to identify people or organizations in

the study. Unless necessary, it is best not to collect this type of information in data collection according to Sekaran & Bougie (2016, p. 149). Keeping this in mind, we strived to limit the collection of such data. The sensitive data that was collected was coded for anonymization in the transcriptions of the recordings, and the recording was deleted after the transcription. The recording itself was done on an analogue non-communicating recorder, provided by the University of Agder in line with the guidelines from NSD.

3.5 Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting the most fitting subjects for data collection. By finding the most representative population or sample units prior to the data collection, the researcher will reduce time, cost and other human resources, and the end results will usually be more reliable (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 235). It is however important that the size of the sample is sufficient for the study to be reliable and generalizable (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 239). The sampling process is very important in quantitative studies due to the importance of confidence level and other statistics when dealing with high numbers of respondents, but it is equally important in qualitative studies that the target research subjects are well defined and not a random selection (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 265).

3.5.1 Sample size

The size of the sample needs to be sufficient for the thesis to be reliable and generalizable. The sufficient number of subject lies at the point of saturation, where no more individual can lead to an answer that have not already be found or contribute with new information (Johannessen et al., 2011, p. 108). In many research fields there can be a time or money constraint that can limit studies from reaching this saturation point, as there is a trade-off between confidence and costs regarding sample size (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 266).

The topic of coopetition is highly complex, and the dynamic of collaboration can shift greatly based on the type of industry. To reach the point of saturation one would likely need to study very many industries and perhaps even conduct studies across multiple nations. In our study we have interviewed a total of 5 organizations with 5 number of people. This is below the saturation point which is much larger. We had a limited sample size mainly because of our limited research timeframe, but it is also likely that we would be able to gain a higher sample size if we were to offer compensation for the interviews.

3.5.2 Selection strategies and recruiting of interviewees

Here we describe the process of recruiting participants for our study. A widely used technique or design for sampling in qualitative studies is *purposive sampling* which is when subject are chosen based on expertise (Johannessen et al., 2011, p. 110). We have used this technique for our study, so when studying organizations, the expertise is retrieved from managers or employees with notably large insight in the organization. We consider managers to be in the best position to provide the first-hand information we are searching for as competition lies closely to the business strategics. Some issues arise early on with this purposive sampling; Managers have generally limited time at disposal due to their large responsibility and many work-tasks, and the available sample selection becomes quite narrow. We attempted two different approaches to the recruiting process in which we only had success in one of them. This process turned out to be more challenging and time-consuming than expected.

Systematic sample selection

In the first approach of selecting a sample for our study we performed a structured systematic approach. The organizations were chosen based on defined criteria, known as a criteria-based selection (Johannessen et al., 2011, p. 113). The first is that the organization had to be in an industry that we from the literature review knew had been especially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations in these industries are more relevant and interesting for the study, as well as more likely to be subjects for competition. The second criterion were that the business is located close in terms of physical distance. This is for convenience as it will be would easier to meet the interview subject in person, as well as it might lower the threshold of participating in the study. We also made sure the organization we chose were in operation before, during and after the pandemic.

By using the web site service “Proff” we gained access to a database of registered organizations in Norway. Proff is a well-regarded professional service that is free for users, and which provides in-depth information about Norwegian companies. The service is closely linked to several large Norwegian business news publishers (Proff, 2022). From this database we could find businesses based on industry and area. The contact information was nonetheless not available in the database, so we had to find this ourselves using the different organizations web pages and online telephone books such as “Gulesider” and “1881”. For some businesses the direct contact information to the manager was not publicly available, which meant that we

could only get in touch with the manager through a general contact form or email address, which was not ideal. This collection of contact information was very time consuming. To get in touch with the organizations we sent emails asking for a short interview at their convenience. We explained the concept of coopetition and gave examples of what could be different types of collaboration with competitors. We also noted that interview data would be anonymized. First, we sent 100 emails, where the response rate was exceedingly low. We then revised our emails and made them more personal and adaptive to each business and sent another 115 emails. This time the response was higher, but not promising for our study. From the 215 emails that was sent, we only had a response rate of 4,6%. The typical response was that the study seemed interesting and important, but that they could not participate because they did not have any cooperative agreements, or that they were constrained for confidentiality provisions. In total, we recruited no participants through our systematic sample selection, and at this point we decided to change our approach as the current method was remarkably time consuming and inefficient. We discuss this further under the limitations section (see section 6.1).

Network-based sample selection

After the unsuccessful attempt at gathering interview participants through systematic sample selection, we believed it was more sensible to recruit interview participants through personal relations. We used relations gained through the workplace and personal networks and asked if they knew any managers which could be fitting for our study. This approach produced much better results as it generated 5 interviews. The organizations and managers we found still fitted under our defined criteria-based selection for sample.

Some consideration must be taken when the participants are found through personal networks. For example, if the personal relation is too close to the interview subject, this may induce bias to the research or harm the protection of the privacy and anonymization of the subjects as they can be traced to the researchers. Interview subjects with close relations to the researchers can as well face the risk of being identified if their organization's business or characteristics are out the ordinary. We did not have direct relations with any of the research subjects in our study, but regardless we chose to be careful in the process of anonymization.

3.5.3 The sample

Our sample consisted of 5 organizations, whereas 4 of them were private businesses and one was public. The persons representing the organizations in our interviews were all managers in central positions regarding the strategies and planning of operations, making them able to answer comprehensively on behalf of the organization. No organization in our sample were operating in the same industry.

The study sample:

Org. A - Clothing agency

Org. B – Contractor

Org. C – Ventilation industry

Org. D – Social healthcare service

Org. E – Accounting and consulting

3.6 Data analysis method

When analyzing data collected in a qualitative study, researchers are working with text rather than numbers. The collection of data could be from various sources such as transcripts from focus groups, articles, newspapers, interview notes or as in our case from transcription of interviews. The objective of an analysis of qualitative data is then to systemize and making valid interference from what can often be an overwhelming amount of data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 332). In qualitative data analysis there are relatively few common accepted and well-established methods such as content analysis, narrative analysis, analytic induction and big data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, pp. 350-351). There are however some general approaches that have been developed in the literature. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 10-11) there are three steps that need to be present in all analyses of qualitative data: (1) Reduction of data, (2) data display and (3) the drawing of conclusions. These are not to be conducted in a linear step-by-step process but are rather a continuous and iterative process combined with collection of the data.

As the interviews in our study are semi-structured and the questions are broad and exploratory, this resulted in interviews that lasted from a range of 30 to 50 minutes. As such, the transcriptions became quite lengthy and there was need for an appropriate analysis method to reduce the data to what is relevant, as well as giving us a presentable result which can be displayed and be useful for drawing of conclusions. A reduction of data is done by coding and

categorizing of the text into units of analysis, which can range in level from single words to broad themes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, pp. 334-335). For our analysis we are categorizing quotes or phrases from the interviews into themes, a method which can be called conceptual analysis which is a form of content analysis (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 350). We are doing this with both a deductive and inductive approach, which means we are using themes generated from the literature review, but also generating new themes in the process of analyzing. This mixed approach which is harmonious with Miles and Huberman’s (1994) advice that useful codes and categories can emerge inductively during the analysis. When searching for themes, it is the expression of an idea that determinates the theme (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990), and as such the text unit can be of varying sizes as long as it exhibit a theme. Lastly the themes are categorized as antecedents or consequences of cooperation.

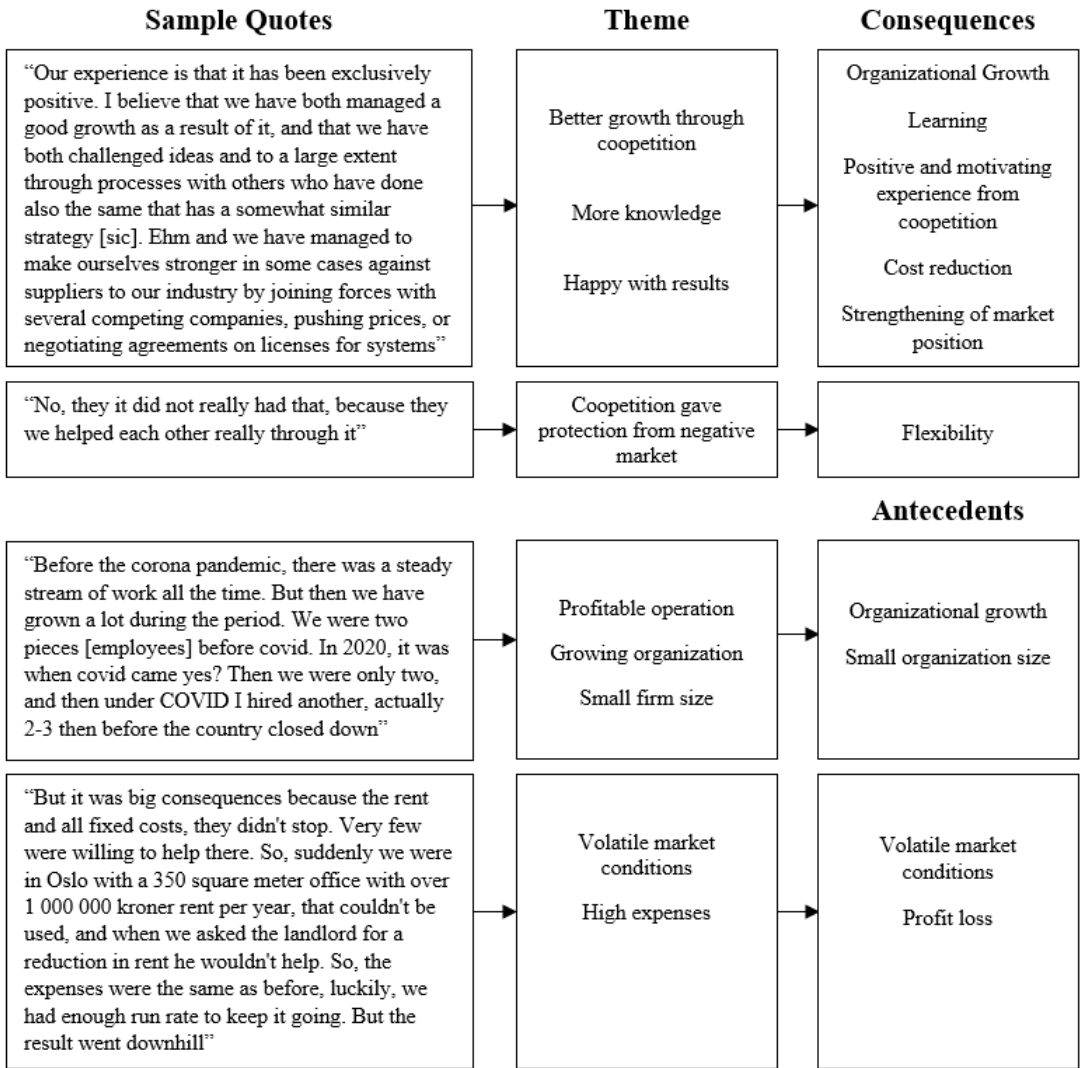


Figure 2: Data categorization example

3.7 Research quality

The quality of our research is highly dependent on the concepts of reliability, credibility, transferability and verifiability to make sure the research is valuable to the stakeholders of the master thesis (Johannessen et al., 2011). Therefore, we are striving to make our gathering of data and discussion in line with these principles.

Central to qualitative studies is the reliability of the data, which is to what degree the data is without bias (error-free) and thus consistent across multiple measures (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, pp. 223-224). Due to the specificity and high degree of personal interpretation in the data we collected, we must consider that our interview objects have their view and perception of the situation. Furthermore, even though we strive to be objective, we always have our own individual, subjective view when interpreting the data (Johannessen et al., 2011). This is of key importance to be aware of when conducting qualitative studies such as in this study where we are classifying and defining data categories, as well as judging relevance and importance of data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 351). Our interviews were of a semi-structured nature, so our interview guide is not exactly how the participants were questioned. The inter guide is included in the appendix to strengthen the sense of reliability (see Appendix A). Credibility of the study is a measure of whether the research gives a correct interpretation of the variables it intends to interpret (Johannessen et al., 2011). To mitigate the loss of credibility we offered to change, add, or remove statements for the interview objects if they felt they hadn't answered as best as they could in the interview. The participants of the study were chosen with credibility in mind, by asking employees with decision-making power and insights into the strategies of the organization. One thing we could have done to further increase the credibility is to interview the other parties of the competitions which our interview objects participated in. Due to a short timeframe, we decided not to go through with interviewing the counterparts as well.

The transferability of the study tells us if the results can be transferred to other contexts and studies with other respondents and yield similar results (Johannessen et al., 2011). To increase transferability, we have attempted to generalize the case specific results so they can be helpful to other studies as well. To ensure verifiability, we did our utmost to display the results objective by presenting datasets and referring to original interview citations through the discussion. Here lies an added responsibility on us as there is a lack of pre-existing literature on how competition works during market crises.

Chapter 4: Results

In this section we present the research data. Each of the five interviewed organizations will be presented individually to provide insight into their operations regarding competitors and collaboration. This is done by showcasing brief summaries of the interviews for context, and then displaying data for the organizations antecedents and consequences concerning coopetition. The data in the tables are ordered by importance, based on frequency of occurrence in the analysis and to what relevance it has to the topic of coopetition. Lastly, we present an overview of the results displaying all the antecedents and consequences in the research ordered by organizational frequency.

4.1 Coopetition in the sample organizations

4.1.1 Org. A - Clothing agency

Org A – Clothing Agency

Coopetition agreement	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	After the pandemic
	☑	☑	☑

Table 3: Coopetition agreements, Org A

Org. A is a small clothing agency with a good economy and high profitability. They work as a broker between clothing brands and clothing stores. We interviewed the entrepreneur and CEO of the business. Due to the nature of their business, relationships are key to be successful. The agency is the representative of the brand, so they must be on good terms with decision-makers in stores. The participant indicated that throwing parties for the stores was a part of the industry, but it was hard for a small agency to compete with the big brands when it came to throwing great parties for the clients. He stated “ I was used to going to big parties with the big brands I worked with, so now I started throwing parties with my colleagues (competitors)”. Therefore, before COVID-19 they found that inviting their competitors, other brands, or agencies, to share the costs of the party, so the clients can attend a great party was beneficial. This had in the participants view a twofold benefit. Because they were able to throw better parties, the clients would have a better time and be happier with the party. Secondly, for example, if there are 4 agencies or brands throwing a party together, they will

invite different clients, meaning that our subject found an arena to acquire new clients that they wouldn't meet otherwise.

When COVID-19 hit, restrictions put an end to parties, so that collaboration stopped. Panic spread through the clothing industry and stores wanted to cancel their orders. The participant extrapolated “suddenly they would stop paying their invoices, suddenly customers wouldn't order for the next summer, suddenly the customers wouldn't take goods they ordered 6 months prior.” This resulted in lower income for the agency, all the while costs were still high, particularly the expenses on a showroom they rented in the capital of Norway. To cut costs, the agency decided to sublease parts of the showroom to competing agencies. This resulted in dramatically cutting down the expenses, as well as a positive side effect; when client representatives came into the showroom, instead of coming into an empty showroom where they would think “Wow, it's really that bad for them”, they came into a showroom with employees still there, giving the impression that everything is going great, even if the employees did not work for our participant. The coopetition also resulted in a better social life for the employees.

Theme Categories – Org A	
Antecedents	Consequences
Volatile market conditions	Flexibility
Coopetition-oriented mindset	Cost reduction
Profit loss	Pooling of resources
Excessive resources	Better access to market
Small organization size	Strengthening of market position
Bad market conditions	Higher perceived brand value
Organizational restructuring	Tension
Low income	Positive and motivating experience from coopetition
	Revenue from selling to competitors
	Positive social interaction
	Goodwill

Table 4: Theme categories, Org A

After the COVID-19 pandemic the agency is planning on finding a new showroom, but now one that they can lease together with other agencies. This time the owner wants to split the lease instead of subleasing, so they don't take on all the risk of the lease. The owner also said that they will start throwing parties together with competitors again.

4.1.2 Org. B – Contractor

Org B – Contractor			
Coopetition agreement	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	After the pandemic
	✓	✓	✓

Table 5: Coopetition agreements, Org B

Organization B is a small contractor firm that is in the business of construction, founded in 2018. Most of their jobs are building and renovating houses, garages etc. In 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the company had 2 employees. Now, in 2022 the company has grown to 8 employees and has very recently merged with one of the competitors they were in a coopetition with. The manager stated that before the pandemic, there were lots of projects available and operations were generally good. At this point they had some collaboration with other small competing companies, where they were sharing the workload and exchanging industry knowledge. The manager stressed that this knowledge sharing was crucial in the early stages of running the business, but also stated that too much collaboration on projects could harm the build-up of the firm’s own customer base and branding.

At the outbreak of the pandemic, all the company’s on-going and planned projects were postponed or cancelled. It did not take long however before the sales in the industry rapidly increased, which in turn made it possible to expand in number of employees. The company largely continued with the existing coopetitions. The coopetition agreements were generally going well, but some relations with other companies could be strained due to financial negotiations, which in turn triggered some tensions were one coopetition agreement were broken.

After the pandemic the high sales of construction services seem to be continuing, as the company manager assume this is a result of people having increased their priority on their homes and property during the pandemic. Due to good collaboration, the contractor has recently merged with a prior competitor run a business together. The manager recommends others in the industry to collaborate with competitors, but to be careful to build its own regular customer base and brand.

Theme Categories – Org B	
Antecedents	Consequences
Volatile market conditions	Flexibility
Small organization size	Learning
Good market conditions	Positive social interaction
Coopetition-oriented mindset	Sharing of workload
Existing network	Revenue from selling to competitors
Organizational growth	Cost reduction
Widespread usage of coopetition in industry	Better access to market
	Strengthening of market position
	Tension
	Loosing intellectual property
	Positive and motivating experience from coopetition
	Pooling of resources
	Termination of coopetition when a part has accomplished its objective
	Long-term collaboration
	Networking
	Time-consuming management

Table 6: Theme categories, Org B

4.1.3 Org. C – Ventilation industry

Org C – Ventilation Industry

Coopetition agreement	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	After the pandemic
	☑	☑	☑

Table 7: Coopetition agreements, Org C

Organization C is a large multinational company specializing in delivering indoor environment solutions. The company produces products and complete ventilation systems for many applications, ranging from restaurant kitchens to offshore platforms. Our interview subject is the manager of the Norwegian division, where the manager currently is the only employee. When looking at the organization, we are analyzing this division. In Norway the company by large focuses on selling its specialized ventilation solutions to hospitals and other similar usages like laboratories and veterinarian clinics. The company delivers its and own manufactured products by providing complete systems with installation to its customers.

Many parts of the projects are outsourced, such as project management, drawing process and installation, but this is coordinated and budgeted by the company. The projects often have a long lifespan due to its need for planning.

Prior to the pandemic the operation was running well and there was some competition with other suppliers in the form of exchanging different products. There are generally few competitors that have competitive products for rooms that have very high requirements for ventilation, so the company mostly sell products related to such use to the other suppliers. The relationships to competitors are friendly and have low levels of tension. The managers states that this could be due to the practice of patenting products and systems in the industry.

When COVID-19 pandemic arrived, there was an extreme rise in demand for the firms' solutions due to the high hygienic standards required when dealing the COVID-19 virus. The market demand was especial high for the firms mobile "isolation bubbles", and for knowledge and competence on how to ventilate specialized rooms. According to the manager the pandemic was very advantageous regarding promotion of the company, and as well as for sales of solution and consulting. During this period the company closed its Norwegian branch that provided ventilation products for office buildings and factories. Instead, a new cooperation agreement was made with a Norwegian ventilation wholesaler where the products now is sold directly from Org C factories to the wholesaler. One of the employees of the closed branch were transferred to the wholesaler. This have maintained the sales, while cutting cost for both companies according to the manager.

In the wake of the pandemic the company have largely had a positive impact in the form of increased reputation in the industry and sales. There are however major issues the company must face going forward which is high a scarcity on data chips, and thus very long delivery times. The manager did however use this as a positive leverage when closing sales with customers.

Theme Categories – Org C	
Antecedents	Consequences
Volatile market conditions Products differs from competitors Patented products and solutions Coopetition-oriented mindset Few competitors Low workload capacity Project-based organization Good market conditions Competition in R&D Operates in multiple markets Projects have long lifespans Resource scarcity Well-known in the industry	Revenue from selling to competitors Cost reduction

Table 8: Theme categories, Org C

4.1.4 Org. D – Social healthcare service

Org D – Social Healthcare Service

Coopetition agreement	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	After the pandemic
	⊗	⊙	⊙

Table 9: Coopetition agreements, Org D

Organization D is a public nursing home for elderly people with neurodegenerative diseases like dementia, with specialized departments for certain other similar diseases. Our interview subject was the manager who had high level of knowledge about development of strategic plans and implementation. Being a public organization, the end goal for the nursing home is not of maximizing profit for owners but to provide high quality healthcare service and maintain a good reputation. Regarding measuring quality, the nursing homes are conducting surveys on patients and next of kind (family/other caretakers) and keeping track of filing of complaints.

There are however some monetary incentives involved. The nursing home receives grant payment per patient per day, which primarily is at fixed rates, but sometimes also at rates depending on patients medical and staff needs. If the costs are lower than income on patients,

the nursing home will keep 80% of the profits while 20% returns to the municipal. If a residence is empty for more than five days, the nursing home does not receive any grants for this unused capacity. This makes it a priority to run at full capacity, and the local nursing homes are in essence competing in gaining patients. It is mostly medical needs and location that decides at which nursing home the elderly will be living, as well as consideration to where their spouse is located. But the family or caretakers fill an application where they can apply for the preferred home for their elderly to live. The manager states that reputation and trustworthiness play a key role when people are deciding about homes.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic the operation where good and stable and there was some cooperation with other nursing homes regarding planning and organizing. This was however not very explicit and consisted mostly of coordination meetings with few practical implications. The manager perceived reluctance among employees and leaders to cooperate with other nursing homes, and even reluctance to collaborate internally across departments.

When the pandemic had its outbreak there was a lack of workforce and it was necessary the local nursing homes to share their pool of employees. The change of workforce at the various homes was not perceived as beneficial for the patients, and it was difficult for employees to adapt to new routines, but the feeling of unity and purpose was high and motivating amongst the employees. The cooperation provided valuable exchanging of knowledge and created innovation of routines.

Most of the sharing of workforce between nursing homes is now discontinued, but there has been an initiative for creating a team of nurses that will help where they are needed as a new form of cooperation. The manager regarded the experience as very positive, and states that the nursing home likely will implement new cooperation agreements in the future.

Theme Categories – Org D	
Antecedents	Consequences
Coopetition-oriented mindset	Positive and motivating experience from coopetition
Volatile market conditions	Flexibility
Crisis motivated for spirit of service	Learning
Lack of workforce	Sharing of workforce
Leave of absence	Pooling of resources
Lack of high-skilled workers	Access to high-skilled workers
High workload	Staff change is not beneficial for patients
Difficulties in planning and organizing during crisis	Time-consuming routine adaptation
Good operation	

Table 10: Theme categories, Org D

4.1.5 Org. E – Accounting and consulting

Org E – Accounting and Consulting

Coopetition agreement	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	After the pandemic
	☑	☑	☑

Table 11: Coopetition agreements, Org E

Org. E is a medium sized accounting and consulting firm with between 50 and 150 employees with a focus on growth. The company is relatively young and have in that regard had a high rate of growth in number of employees. Our interview object is the entrepreneur, CEO, and partner of the business. In the accounting space there is according to our participant widespread usage of coopetition. Firstly, accountants are required by law to cooperate whenever a handover of a client is done. The first accountant must give the clients data to the new accountant and help in the transition phase. This creates opportunities for creating coopetitions. Our participant said that some of their coopetitions had started from such situations.

Because of their ambitions of growth, they utilize growth strategies, one of which is coopetition. The main points of collaboration with their competitors are innovation, method, and capacity. Before COVID-19 the company had high growth and collaborated with many competitors to acquire knowledge and systems to become better at service delivery, sales, and operations. Also, they have collaborators which they refer clients to and get clients kickbacks if there are capacity constraints or fitness of clients works better with the other firm. The

interview object is clear on the question of whether he is happy with the results from coopetition it was unequivocally positive.

When COVID-19 restrictions started, the firm was faced with much higher workloads, due to various reasons, but notably because governmental compensation plans where businesses needed help submitting applications for these. According to our participant this spike in workload caused a need for putting their head down and focusing on themselves to be able to handle the service delivery. The result was less coopetition during the pandemic, simply because of less time to collaborate with the competitors. The increase in workload also halted innovation both internally and together with competitors.

After the pandemic the business has already experienced that they are able to collaborate more and start innovating again to continue their growth. The business is interested in continuing to collaborate with competitors as well as creating new relationships further down the line. They have found coopetition to be a highly beneficial factor for accomplishing their goals.

Theme Categories – Org E	
Antecedents	Consequences
Widespread usage of coopetition in industry	Learning
Coopetition-oriented mindset	Innovation
Human capital-intensive industry	Cost reduction
Normalcy	More coopetition
Good operation	Access to new resources
Priority on growth	Better access to market
Manageable workload	Flexibility
Digitalization of industry	Increased customer retention
	Organizational growth
	Positive and motivating experience from coopetition
	Strengthening of market position

Table 12: Theme categories, Org E

4.2 Overview of coopetition during times of crisis

Coopetition Agreement Overview					
Coopetition agreement	Org A	Org B	Org C	Org D	Org E
Before the pandemic	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
During the pandemic	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
After the pandemic	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 13: Coopetition agreements overview

In our interviews there were a few common themes, such as coopetition-oriented mindset being an antecedent that four out of five of the participants experienced. Other antecedents such as a volatile market where one needed to mitigate the effects of volatility, good relationship with competitors and widespread usage of coopetition were also mentioned by multiple participants. Four out of five participants also stated that consequences from coopetition had been increased flexibility, sharing of resources and they generally had good results and a positive experience with coopetition. Other interesting consequences mentioned include, cost reduction, learning from collaborators, innovation, networking, and increased revenue by selling to competitors.

Interestingly, some of these antecedents and consequences changed for the organizations when COVID-19 hit. Org A stated, “suddenly 30% of our business which was “milk and bread”, meaning goods that stores ordered like every Monday, full stop.”, further “they would stop paying their invoices, suddenly they wouldn’t order for the next summer or receive the goods ordered six months prior”. This happened all the while the pandemic caused big consequences, “it was big consequences because the rent and all fixed costs, they didn’t stop.”, he explains that the rent was very expensive in the middle of Oslo, the capital of Norway. This led them to seek coopetitions where they subleased to competitors to cover their expenses. For Org B the market also became increasingly volatile, and our participant indicated that he was happy that he had collaborators he could lean on to hold off the increased volatility that came with the pandemic.

Frequency of themes – All organizations			
Antecedents		Consequences	
5	Coopetition-oriented mindset	4	Cost reduction
4	Volatile market conditions	4	Flexibility
2	Good market conditions	4	Positive and motivating experience
2	Good operation		from coopetition
2	Small organization size	3	Better access to market
2	Widespread usage of coopetition in industry	3	Learning
		3	Pooling of resources
1	Bad market conditions	3	Revenue from selling to competitors
1	Competition in R&D	2	Positive social interaction
1	Crisis motivated for spirit of service	2	Strengthening of market position
1	Difficulties in planning and organizing during crisis	2	Tension
		1	Access to high-skilled workers
1	Digitalization of industry	1	Access to new resources
1	Excessive resources	1	Goodwill
1	Existing network	1	Higher perceived brand value
1	Few competitors	1	Time-consuming management
1	High workload	1	Increased customer retention
1	Human capital-intensive industry	1	Innovation
1	Lack of high-skilled workers	1	Long-term collaboration
1	Lack of workforce	1	Loosing intellectual property
1	Leave of absence	1	More coopetition
1	Low income	1	Networking
1	Low workload capacity	1	Organizational growth
1	Manageable workload	1	Sharing of workforce
1	Normalcy	1	Sharing of workload
1	Operates in multiple markets	1	Staff change is not beneficial for patients
1	Organizational growth		
1	Organizational restructuring	1	Termination of coopetition when a part has accomplished its objective
1	Patented products and solutions		
1	Priority on growth	1	Time-consuming routine adaptation
1	Products differs from competitors		
1	Profit loss		
1	Project-based organization		
1	Projects have long lifespans		
1	Resource scarcity		
1	Well-known in the industry		

Table 14: Frequency of themes, all organizations

Workload is an antecedent to coopetition that changed with the pandemic, but for two of our participants the antecedent was opposite. For Org D, when corona and restrictions started the workload increased a lot which led them to start coopetitions to share the workload with competitors. On the contrary, Org E also experienced a higher workload leading to less competition than before the pandemic. Org B, like Org D and E also experienced a higher workload, but for them the usage coopetition remained the same as before the pandemic.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this section we discuss our research results and present relevant findings to help answering our research question(s). First, we highlight the themes with highest organizational frequency, as well as other themes from the results that are of special importance to individual organizations in our study, or important to the topic of coopetition during crises. In doing this we will examine and compare how the different organizations were affected by the various themes. We will then proceed to summarize the research findings to help answering our research questions.

5.1 Antecedents

It is important for the study to observe the different antecedents of coopetition considering normalcy versus crisis. There are multiple circumstances preceding coopetitions, and so we will discuss the antecedents that was deemed to be of highest importance and possibly had an impact on the usage of coopetition strategies during times of crisis.

5.1.1 Coopetition-oriented mindset

Gnyawali and Park (2011) indicated in their study that coopetition-oriented mindset is one of the main antecedents for entering a coopetition. This is logical and was confirmed by four of five of our interview objects. Org A said “Firstly, I am the type of person who doesn't want to bad-mouth anyone and would rather arrange something with colleagues in the industry”, giving the impression that coopetition is a humane way to go about business. When we asked Org E whether it was their mentality rather than external circumstances that pushed them towards coopetition, the manager answered, “It is partly because of our mentality in the way we have done it, and that we are open for collaboration and are happy to share, in a way”. He also talked about them not sharing everything with their collaborators, but in terms of method and client referrals they are able to learn from their collaborators and receive new clients with limited downside and tension.

One of our participants, Org D indicated that the coopetition-oriented mindset came with the pandemic. We asked her “Are you under the impression that the employees were more willing because of this being a crisis?” to which she said “Absolutely!”. We continued asking her whether it would be the same in a normal setting, in which the manager answered “No, I don't think that would have been so. Then it would be hard getting an employee to go from one

department to another”. The pandemic created an interesting change in the psychology of the managers and employees in Org D, which could be a result of their profession. Seeing as they are in healthcare, they could be more inclined to put themselves to the side when the crisis came, because their job is to help people.

Org B indicated that they too have a cooperation-oriented mindset while Org C stated that they have good relationships with their competitors and exchange information, but don't have a cooperation-oriented mindset. When four out of five interview objects said that they have a propensity to collaborate with competitors, it gives an impression that confirms Gnyawali and Park (2011) understanding that this is one of the most important antecedents to cooperation. Having such a mindset can be an advantage when crisis strikes, because in many cases it is better to have someone to lean on. Having a cooperation-oriented mindset is also likely to decrease the negative tension in a cooperation, as one is more prepared for the ups and downs of the relationship.

5.1.2 Volatile market conditions

Three of our participants experienced volatile market conditions and these influenced cooperation in various ways. Org B was in a situation before corona where they were getting regular jobs and the market was relatively stable. Once corona came, the customers panicked and almost everyone cancelled their orders or postponed. “Suddenly we stood there completely without work”, stated the manager of Org B, before he continued to say “but then suddenly the market exploded again. Everyone wanted to do something”, referring to customers wanting to renovate. He indicated that this was due to travel restrictions and more time at home office. So, people had the money they saved from going on vacation and the time to plan renovations. Because of these huge fluctuations in the market the manager was happy that they had competitors to lean on, both when they needed work and when they needed extra hands themselves. These volatile market conditions were also a case for the clothing agency, Org A, who lost 30% of their business overnight and needed cutting the fixed costs quickly. For them this resulted in cooperation as well. Org C experienced huge fluctuations in currency, because they are selling in NOK to their customers while buying the goods in EUR. In their case they were saved by force majeure clauses in the contracts and the extreme volatility in the currencies did not directly lead to new cooperations. But the pandemic led to rising interest in Org C's competence on specialized virus ventilation rooms, which led to new cooperations. Caused directly by the COVID-19 pandemic, Org D

experienced volatile market condition in the form of very high workload and lack of workforce as well as unpredictability which made it difficult to plan and organize operation. This resulted in cooperation agreements with other nursing homes. Org E experienced a tremendous increase in workload due to COVID-19 compensation plans which needed filing for customers. For Org E, this resulted in a decrease of cooperation during the pandemic.

The interesting differences in reaction to a volatile market is that most of our participants reacted to volatility with more cooperation, but Org E reacted with decreasing the amount of cooperation. Likely this is due to the nature of E's cooperations which base themselves on sharing of knowledge and innovation. If one is overwhelmed with work, it is hard to focus on improving and innovating. The others had different reasons for cooperating such as needing to save costs or needing more workforce, which are in turn heightened by volatility in the market.

5.1.3 Small organization size

Small organization size as an antecedent occurred in interview with Org B and A. In an article by Bengtsson and Johansson (2012), they point to the benefits of small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as the lack of resources, market presence and dependence on few suppliers that comes with it. When the company is newly founded and small it does not have the same resources as more mature and bigger businesses. Therefore, it can be good for small businesses to work together across industries or with competitors. Org A certainly knows this as the founder was used to having ample resources at his disposal in his earlier employments in big brands. He said "because I worked into big clothing brands who threw big parties and shows and invited to come into their universe. But suddenly I stood there alone with a small agency we were too small and didn't have enough money to throw the biggest parties or have the biggest offices". This originated the idea of finding someone to collaborate with to throw bigger and better parties for clients. Org B also was a start-up who lacked resources, both in manpower and knowledge. The small firm size impelled them to find cooperation partners to fill the voids. In correlation with the pandemic our interview results imply that being of small size can make organization more dependent on cooperation relations when the crisis occurs than larger organizations. A bigger organization is likely better suited to weather the storm than a smaller firm due to higher resources access.

5.1.4 Widespread usage of coopetition in industry

From our participants, Org E and B stated they were in industries where coopetition is inherently common. From the literature the antecedent is an important key driver of coopetition. New businesses in industries where coopetition is widely used as strategy is usually gravitated to coopetition strategies to make sure they are able to compete (Bengtsson & Kock, 2014). Org E stated that the suppliers of accounting software and systems encourage coopetition through seminars and forums where different accounting and consulting firms can discuss and help each other. These types of forums give the firms an opportunity to meet and create collaborations. Org B told us that coopetitions are very common in the construction industry, both in small firms and big firms. This happens because the workload is varying, and projects are of different sizes. So, having a high degree of coopetition in the industry is essential for being as efficient as possible.

Whether the amount of coopetition in an industry is substantially different during crises compared to normalcy is not possible to conclude without conducting research on multiple firms in the same industry. However, as we have seen in some of the other factors we have discussed, the amount of coopetition has risen with the pandemic in four of the organizations interviewed and decreased in Org E. If this was to be extrapolated to industries, widespread usage of coopetition would be increased during times of crisis.

5.2 Consequences

In answering our research questions, it is critical to assess the consequences of coopetition during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Here we will highlight and discuss the consequences that was deemed to be of highest importance and might have had an impact on the usage of coopetition strategies during times of crisis. Importance is based on frequency of appearance in our analysis as well as relevance to the topic.

5.2.1 Flexibility

Flexibility as a consequence occurred in interview with Org B, A, D, and E. This makes it one of the top three most common consequences for our interviewed organizations. By the categorization flexibility we mean the organizations ability to adapt quickly to changes in the business environment.

The interviewed organizations in our study expressed that cooperation agreements allowed for more flexibility, in various forms such as financial flexibility or capacity. From existing literature, flexibility is used interchangeably with agility, mobility and responsiveness, and is seen as a requirement for long-term organizational stability (De Leeuw & Volberda, 1996). Almost 50 years ago Steers (1975) did a paper review of 17 studies on organizational efficiency where he noted that flexibility was the most frequently used criterion for effectiveness.

For Org B the flexibility was about exchanging employees through renting and sharing workload with competitors. Initially Org B lost and postponed all its jobs at the outbreak of the pandemic. The manager noted that “sometimes a competitor had been lucky to obtain a large job, that they don’t have capacity for” and that they then could share the project keeping the employees of Org B in work. Shortly later in the pandemic when the construction market conditions turned very good, Org B could by renting employees from competitors instead of hiring, take on more and larger projects, without the increased risk associated with expanding the firm in case market should turn bad again.

Org A noted that the most positive aspect of their cooperation was the flexibility. The manager commented “You are lighter on your feet economically because you don’t have the same commitments ..., it gives the possibility to act faster if something should happen”. This was related to their sharing of premises and other operating costs with competitors. For Org D, the nursing home, flexibility from cooperation emerged by sharing of workforce with competitors during the crisis. This was necessary because of shifts in patient capacity and staff competency in the various nursing homes. Org E noted that sharing customers with competitors creates flexibility in capacity. The manager commented “If a competitor receives a customer case that they don’t have ability to take on, they take us in the heat [expression] and present us to the customer”.

Flexibility has undoubtedly been a very important quality during the pandemic as there were rapid major changes in the business environment which required organizations to adapt. Some of the organizations reported flexibility being a consequence of cooperation also prior to the pandemic, but our analysis emphasizes that it has been especially frequent and important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2.2 Positive and motivating experience from coopetition

Positive and motivating experience from coopetition as a consequence occurred in interview with Org D, A, E and B. The category means that the mentioned organizations had a good experience from using coopetition as a strategy, notable during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that they are motivated to continue using coopetition as organizational strategy. There are little prior literature that examines the perceived experience from coopetitions, but there are studies that suggest that organizations with previous experiences with coopetition yields better results from coopetition agreements (Park et al., 2014a).

The manager of Org D was pleasantly surprised by the experience of coopetition. Prior to the pandemic there was very little form of coopetition in the organization, and the employees were reluctant in working with others, even internally across departments. But the COVID-19 pandemic created a unique unity among the nursing homes. The manager noted “but then all instances collaborated about giving and receiving personnel to keep things responsible, and it was a very nice experience I thought, how easy people were to just go into a new workplace in the crisis”. She also commented “I believe a lot of the employees got a good feeling on it, that we collaborate when it is needed. It has made us think differently and new”.

Org A had such positive experience with coopetition that they are now looking for premises that have place for themselves and multiple competitors. The manager commented about the competitors “they still want to be with us, because they see such good synergies”. Org E believed that their coopetition agreements had been “exclusively positive” and that “we have clearly seen good growth as a result of it”. Org B recommends specifically small firms in the contracting industry to go into coopetition as it contributes to growth. The manager said, “it is very wise to have one [competitor] you can lean on.”

In summary there is generally not much that implies the experience of coopetition is any different during the pandemic than in normal market conditions. We can see however that for some organizations like Org D in our study, the crises almost forced them into a coopetition agreement that they likely would not have entered if it was not for the pandemic. And in this case, it was a positive result, widening the organizations strategic competence.

5.2.3 Pooling of resources

Pooling of resources as a consequence occurred in interview with Org A, B and D. The category means that the organizations together with their competitors can assemble their resources in a larger pot to achieve something they otherwise would not accomplish. This lies closely with terms “growing the pie” and “strengthening of market position” in the literature, which ultimately relates to being able to compete with larger organizations (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996). For the organizations in our study, the pooling of resources was specifically pooling of capital.

Org A could when pooling resources (capital) with competitors throw bigger more extravagant parties for brand promotion like the big companies. The manager commented in the interview:

“You can use 10 000 on a party and it will be a boring party in the corner of a bad club. It won't compete with the big brands. But if you spend 100 000 it will be a big happening, maybe happening of the year.”

When there were restrictions during the pandemic, Org A with its competitors would throw expensive small dinner parties for customers instead. By pooling resources “the night would be twice as fun, and twice as good.” Org B could when pooling resources (capital) with competitors take on larger contracting projects than they otherwise would be able to, but also achieve better financing terms from suppliers and banks. Org D could by pooling resources (capital) with competitors afford to hire a shared staff of high-skilled workers during the pandemic. This pooling has been so successful the manager of Org D is considering maintaining this cooperation agreement also after the pandemic.

From our results we cannot see a that pooling of resources as a consequences of cooperation behaves any different or have higher importance during times of crises than during normal market circumstances.

5.2.4 Cost reduction

Cost reduction occurred as a consequence in interview with Org A, B, C and E. Although being closely related to pooling of resources, cost reduction as consequence means that the organization were able to cut already existing costs by entering cooperation.

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Org A suddenly had a 350 square meter office of unused space with a high fixed cost of about 1 000 000kr a year, impairing the business results. To conquer this, they decided to rent space to a couple of competitors that had a lot of the same customer base. The competitors were given a fair good price on the rent, as the goal for Org A was to cover the expenses, not to make high profit of the competitors. In doing this Org A was able to reduce its fixed costs substantially.

Org C entered a cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic by cutting a link in the value chain, and instead supply a competing supplier (wholesaler) directly from its own factory, reducing costs for both parts. Org E reduces its cost with cooperation by sharing costs related to software systems and licenses, and research and development. The manager noted “we have sometimes managed to make ourselves stronger in some cases against suppliers to our industry by joining forces with several competing companies, pushing prices, or negotiating agreements on licenses for our systems”.

Org B reduces its cost with cooperation by gaining lower purchase prices on building materials when buying larger quantum together with competitors. Additionally, the terms of purchase are better, and the manager noted that they notice they get higher priority from suppliers.

We will argue that cost reduction can be a highly beneficial consequence from cooperation during the crises. Bad market conditions and high fixed costs is a danger to all businesses, and then being able to cut costs through cooperation is positive for profitable operation.

5.2.5 Learning

Learning occurred as a consequence in interview with Org E, B and D. This categorization is the obtaining of knowledge from competitors that arises through knowledge sharing. This is from existing literature a highly common benefit of cooperation, especially the access to industry specific knowledge that can come from competitors (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004).

Due to accounting and consulting being a human capital-intensive industry, learning was most frequently mentioned in the interview with Org E. The manager commented that by sharing knowledge with competitors, they are challenging their own thoughts and gaining inspiration from competitors. The learning process consists mainly of sharing of ideas, work methods,

systems, and tools, as well as customer case solving. By “combining heads”, research and development gets efficient and of higher quality. There are also meetings between accounting systems suppliers and competing accounting firms, where they discuss the future development of the software systems. At the outbreak of the pandemic, Org E turned its focus internally and the sharing of knowledge was reduced compared to before the pandemic. This was largely a result of less available time for knowledge development and to “keep their own people in check”, but also due to pandemic social distancing restrictions which made it practically more difficult to collaborate with others. The manager noted that they did however share knowledge and learn from competitors about how to handle the pandemic regarding home offices, what kind of experience others had with layoffs, how to deal with various issues, and some work methods that worked well in the pandemic.

Org B stated that their cooperation agreements led to learning, because by working together with competitors they could discuss “how to do all the different things” and discuss calculation of project costs. By sharing knowledge, they could also take on larger projects where the competing firms had different specialized competencies. Org D have learned through cooperation during the pandemic when they were sharing employees with other nursing homes. The manager noted that when employees came back from other workplaces at the end of the pandemic, they had a lot of ideas about new ways of doing things, as well as recognition of current methods that works well which was not implemented at other nursing homes. Org C did share its knowledge about specialized ventilation for virus management with competitors during the COVID-19 pandemic but did not obtain any learning themselves from the competitors.

Through our results we can see that learning, or sharing of knowledge, is a consequence that frequently emerges from cooperation agreements which is in line with existing literature. Undoubtedly learning have had a positive effect during the pandemic for the studied organizations. We do not however see any fundamental difference in how the consequence behaves during the pandemic versus in normal circumstances.

5.2.6 Better access to market

Better access to market as a consequence occurred in interview with Org A and E.

This categorization means that the organizations were able to reach new customers or markets by entering cooperation.

Org A normally gain new customers from cooperation by arranging customer parties and showrooms with competitors. The manager notes “you get access to potential clients through the others who might have invited 50 clients.” In doing this, Org A also meet exotic potential customers that are usually hard to reach through email or phone, which is how Org A obtains most of its clients. During the pandemic when Org A was renting space to competitors, the manager discovered that by sharing geographical location with competitors the company gained access to many new customers. The different clothing agencies would then cooperate and refer potential clients to each other. Org A intends to continue this practice in the future, so when looking for new office space, they are looking for a space that fits multiple agencies.

Org E gains new customers through their competitors by referencing. The manager noted “when competing firms don’t have capacity for new clients, or the customer don’t fit their profile, they refer them us, or vice versa”. There is no direct monetary incentive for this, but however if it is a high-profile customer, it is usually courtesy that the acquiring company perform a payment for the customer introduction. Sometimes competitors also refer customers as repayment for case-solving. As mentioned earlier, Org B have gained access to a larger market by being able to take on larger projects together with competitors than they otherwise would have been able to do alone.

We did not discover any special relation between better access to market as a consequence and cooperation during crises. It may perhaps be that organizations are not so focused on accessing new markets or customers in times of crises. For Org B it was more a positive side-effect from sharing premises with competitors which was motivated by cost reduction.

5.2.7 Revenue from selling to competitors

Revenue from selling to competitors as a consequence occurred in interview with Org C, A and B. This category means that the organizations are able to gain monetary payment from competitors as a result of cooperation.

Org C makes profit of selling their ventilation products and systems to competing firms, offering solutions the other firms do not possess. In the pandemic Org C also made revenue by offering consultation on their expertise on highly specialized ventilation rooms to competitors. Org D made revenue from selling to competitors by renting out office space to

competitors during the pandemic. As mentioned under the consequence cost reduction, the competitors were given a fair price on the rent, as the intention for Org A was to just cover the expenses and not to make high profit. Org E gain revenue from competitors by referring and introducing customers to competitors, while Org B obtains revenue from competitors by renting employees to competitors. At the outbreak of the pandemic, Org B did this more than usual.

Three of the interviewed organizations in our study had positive effects from selling to competitors during the pandemic, which likely can help mitigate revenue loss in bad market conditions during crises. We cannot however draw any more generalizable conclusions from these results.

5.2.8 Positive social interaction

Positive social interaction as a consequence occurred in interview with Org B and A. This consequence means that the organizations experienced through coopetition social interaction that was seen as positive for the employees.

Org B emphasized on how important the social aspect of everyday work life for employees are. The manager noted that as a small firm it is very beneficial to share knowledge and collaborate with competitors on projects, but an almost equally important aspect of it is the social interaction in for example lunch breaks. During the pandemic when there were many social distancing restrictions, meeting people in a work setting was seen as very positive.

Org A gained positive social interaction through the showrooms, customer parties and dinners arranged together with competitors, as well through being located in the same office space as competitors. This was seen as very important during the pandemic. The manager commented “there was an awfully lot of others under the corona [pandemic] who either sat alone in empty showrooms or offices” but noted that on their own location together with competitors “there was music and we had food ..., so people thought it was really nice to be there.”

Positive social interaction seems to be a highly specific coopetition consequence for the COVID-19 pandemic, related to the governmental social distancing restrictions. It is not present in existing coopetition literature, and it will likely not be present and of relevance in future crises, unless it features social distancing restrictions.

5.2.9 Tension

Tension as a consequence emerged in interview with Org B and A. The category of tension is a very central element of the competitive relationship in cooptition and means that the organizations experience negative emotions in their cooptition relations. This is usually caused by contradictory objectives between the competitors (self-interest) or distrust (Santolaya-Sanz, Mora-Valentín, & Ortiz-de-Urbina-Criado, 2017). If the tension between competitors in a cooptition becomes too high, it can cripple the collaboration, resulting in sabotage or dissolvment of the relation (Raza-Ullah et al., 2014).

Org B experienced tension in cooptitive relations related to economy and lending of employees. Sometimes they would disagree with competitors about distribution of project revenue, which could lead to arguing and sometimes even termination of collaboration. This could also happen in relations with suppliers making it difficult to trust them. The manager noted “then suddenly they price themselves completely in the bucket, and loses money on a delivery, and suddenly they have to make up for what they lost.” This supplier behavior was furthermore amplified during the pandemic where raw prices on construction materials increased multiple times. In regard to lending of employees, the tension in the cooptition occurred because even if the collaboration through lending is successful, it prevents the building of branding for Org B among.

Org A experienced sometimes small levels tension in regard to arranging showrooms with competitors, where the competitor sometimes would not tidy and clean showrooms or show up late. The industry also is somewhat plagued by competitors talking negative or creating rumors about other clothing agencies to gain them attention themselves. The manager of Org D also expressed that it is of importance to pick with caution the right competitor relations.

We could not observe from our results that tension behaves differently during the COVID-19 pandemic than in normal circumstances. It is however not hard to image that other types of market crises can spark tension in cooptition relations.

5.3 Summary of discussion

Here we will summarize and discuss the main results of our study. The antecedents and consequences of coopetition are many, but in our study, we have focused on the themes which are of high relevance to coopetition during crisis.

We have seen that coopetition strategies have formed in many cases based on the business having a *coopetition-oriented mindset* in the first place. An interesting result was that the COVID-19 pandemic in one case shifted the mindset of the otherwise unwilling personnel to a more coopetition-oriented mindset due to the severity of the situation. It could be that if external factors are dire enough, unwilling employees and managers might be swayed towards being more collaborative. Of course, there is a difference in entering a coopetition and having a positive attitude and experience of it. So external drivers might cause businesses to enter a coopetition even without a coopetition-oriented mindset. This case might have been a one-off or related to the social service industry that Org D is in, where the employees might be generally caring people who will sacrifice own well-being for the greater good. For Org D, this also turned out to provide the consequence of *positive and motivating experience from coopetition*. Which is interesting because the manager of Org D expressed that employees had difficulties in collaborating with other, even internally across departments. The feeling of contributing to something greater could explain some of the reason for the positive coopetition experience in Org D (W. Liu & Aaker, 2008). During COVID-19, contributing and giving of themselves is exactly what employees at nursing homes have done.

Antecedents	Consequences
Coopetition-oriented mindset	Flexibility
Volatile market circumstances	Cost reduction
	Learning
	Positive social interaction

Table 15: Central findings of change in coopetition during pandemic

Volatile market circumstances have been a central antecedent for coopetition during the COVID-19 pandemic for all of the interviewed organizations. Some of the organizations in our study experienced bad market conditions, some experienced a market upturn, and one organization even encountered both. For most of our participants it resulted in more coopetition, but for one it resulted in less coopetition. This was likely due to the nature of the

coopetition agreements (see section 5.1.3). Tightly related to the volatile market circumstances we have found wide term *flexibility* to be a consequence that have played an important role during the pandemic for four of the five organizations in the study sample. The flexibility gained by coopetition agreements allowed for quick adaption to the fast-changing business environment, which is a critical quality in volatile markets. While *cost reduction* is a central theme of the coopetition literature, we found that only Org A in our study implemented cost reduction in coopetition agreement as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The other three organizations that had cost reduction as a consequence had this implemented prior to the pandemic, but they also benefitted from this during the pandemic. Our research suggest that cost reduction is a highly beneficial consequence of coopetition during times of crisis.

Only one of the organizations stated that *learning* was a consequence from coopetition triggered directly by the COVID-19 pandemic. Org D said that when they started coopetitions with other nursing homes to share workforce, they learned a lot from the other organizations. The new knowledge was taken back to Org D and some of it was implemented in their own routines. Some of the other organizations had learning as coopetition consequence prior to the pandemic and benefitted from these relations during the pandemic. Beside this example, we did not however see any fundamental difference in how the sharing of knowledge behaved during the pandemic. It seems to always be an important aspect of coopetition, which is in line with existing literature.

A final highly specific consequence of coopetition during the COVID-19 pandemic was *positive social interaction*. This abnormal consequence was observed in the two smallest organizations of our study. Due to the governmental social distancing restrictions in the pandemic, many people would only get to meet other people in work settings. Likely because of few employees, the social meetings through coopetition relations were experienced as highly positive. This consequence will likely not be applicable in other types of crises. It is not present in existing coopetition literature, and it will likely not be present in future crises, unless it features social restrictions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Conclusion of the study

The aim of this study was to investigate on how coopetition is affected and behaves during market crisis as opposed to normal circumstances. Based on this we developed research questions grounded in the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted a qualitative study in attempt to answer them.

RQ1: *Did formation and continuation of coopetition change with the COVID-19 outbreak?*

Our study suggest that some antecedents and consequences of coopetition played a more important role during the COVID-19 pandemic than during normal market circumstances. This was notably true for flexibility as a consequence. Organizations gaining this from coopetition reported specifically about increased flexibility in terms of operating costs and workload. This made the organizations better suited to withstand the negative impacts and adapt quickly to the volatile market conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In regard to antecedents of coopetition, our study shows that multiple key drivers of coopetition were present during the pandemic, suggesting that the crisis generated new coopetition agreements in the business market.

RQ2: *Can coopetition strategies utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic benefit in a post-pandemic setting?* The study did not reveal explicit support for specified strategies that also would work well in normal market circumstances, but we saw that some of the consequences from the coopetition during the COVID-19 pandemic can be positive long-term. Four out of the five organizations in the study had a positive and motivating experience from coopetition as strategy during the pandemic and was positive in continuing practicing coopetition. Three of the organizations gained long-term coopetition agreements they otherwise would not have if it was not for the pandemic.

The small sample size of the study harms the research quality, and it would not be responsible to present the conclusion as generalizable for all organizations. But the observations are still valid and expands upon the knowledge about how coopetition strategy behaves during market crisis. The study highlights some key antecedents and consequences that are of importance and demonstrate how research in the field of coopetition can be conducted, making way for further research in the field. We suggest that future studies on coopetition during market

crises should explicitly examine or question organizations about the central antecedents and consequences found of importance in this master thesis. In the next chapter there will be a discussion of the limitations of the study.

6.2 Limitations of the study

The most significant limitation to this master thesis is the low sample size. We had great difficulties in terms of recruiting interview objects and getting a sufficiently sized research sample. As mentioned in under the method chapter we emailed 215 different companies in select industries, without any one of these being able or willing to be interviewed for our project. This is likely due to organizations being unfamiliar with the term cooptation, and the complexity of the topic. After these rejections we found ourselves in a place of near desperation as this process had been very time consuming, and we then resorted to asking in our own networks if anyone knew someone we could interview. Ultimately, we were only able to gather a sample of five interview objects, who met the basic criteria of our alias, namely, to have been in a cooptation before and/or during the COVID-19 pandemic. We did conduct an interview with a sixth organization as well but realized during the interview that the organization did not meet our criteria.

We believe that by only extending the sample size to 10 or 12 would have greatly contributed to the concepts of reliability, credibility, transferability, and verifiability, and make the research much more valuable to stakeholders. But this was not possible in our limited time frame for the thesis. If we were to conduct the research again, we would have chosen a more direct approach of recruiting interview objects than through emails. Even though the data sample in our research is small, we find that the master thesis still is a somewhat helpful contribution to the narrow field of cooptation during times of crisis.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Interview guideline

Interview Guideline

Interview orientation

1. Background for the interview and what the interview will be about.
2. How the results will be used.
3. Privacy policy and anonymization of the interview object and company.
4. Inform about the right to stop the interview at any time and to change/correct their answers throughout the interview.
5. Request for allowance to use tape recorder during the interview.
6. Offer the informant to receive the final paper result.
7. Request for potential need for clarification.
8. Hand-out study information letter to interview object.
9. Get paper signature from interview object on declaration of consent.

After getting consent from the interview object, we start recording and do the interview:

1. Introduction:

1. How would you briefly describe your role in the company?
2. Can you please explain what your company does?
3. How would you describe your insight into the company business strategies?

2. Competition before the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. How was the company's performance operationally and financially before the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Did the company have collaboration with competitors before the COVID-19 pandemic?

If yes:

- I) What are the main points that your collaboration consists of?

II) What were the circumstances that drove you to collaborate with your competitors?

III) What was the purpose of this collaboration? (What did you hope to gain from the collaboration?)

IV) How did you engage with the other party/parties to join a collaboration?

V) How did you find the results of the collaboration before the pandemic?

3. Coopetition during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the company and its performance?

2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect already existing collaboration with competitors? (*Don't ask if the company didn't collaborate with competitors before COVID-19*)

3. Did the company start any new collaboration with competitors during the COVID-19 pandemic?

If yes:

I) What are the main points that your collaboration consists of?

II) What were the circumstances that drove you to collaborate with your competitors?

III) What was the purpose of this collaboration? (What did you hope to gain from the collaboration?)

IV) How did you engage with the other party/parties to join a collaboration?

V) How did you find the results of the collaboration during the pandemic?

4. Coopetition after the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Do you think there will be long-term effects on the company from the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Do you plan to keep on collaborating with competitors?

If yes:

I) How do you imagine the collaboration will change post-pandemic?

II) Are there already changes in the collaboration?

5. Experience and industry:

1. What is your overall experience with doing collaboration with competitors?

2. Do you have anything that was especially negative or positive about collaborating with competitors?

3. What do you believe is the strongest driving force in your industry that leads companies to collaborate with competitors?
4. Do you know other companies in the same industry have experience with collaborating with competitors?
5. Would you recommend other companies in the same industry to enter competition?

7. Final part of the interview/ summary

1. Is there anything you would like to add we have not asked about? Is there anything you want to explain or specify one last time?

We will end the recording of the interview by informing the interview object about the privacy policy and anonymity of our study.

Stop recording the interview - and inform our interviewee about this

- We ask for permission for to reach out for follow-up questions in the future.
- We ask if the interview object knows about other specific people we should be interviewing in our research.
- Thank the interview object for contributing to our study.

Appendix B: NSD study approval



Vurdering

Referansenummer

824400

Prosjekttittel

Masteroppgave

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Universitetet i Agder / Handelshøyskolen ved UiA / Institutt for strategi og ledelse

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

Andreas Erich Wald, andreas.wald@uia.no, tlf: 95732342

Type prosjekt

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

Kontaktinformasjon, student

Bjørnar Berg, bjornb17@student.uia.no, tlf: 95935446

Prosjektperiode

21.03.2022 - 01.06.2022

Vurdering (1)

12.04.2022 - Vurdert**OM VURDERINGEN**

Personverntjenester har en avtale med institusjonen du forsker eller studerer ved. Denne avtalen innebærer at vi skal gi deg råd slik at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet ditt er lovlig etter personvernregelverket.

Personverntjenester har nå vurdert den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at behandlingen er lovlig, hvis den gjennomføres slik den er beskrevet i meldeskjemaet med dialog og vedlegg.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til den datoen som er oppgitt i meldeskjemaet.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

Personverntjenester vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Personverntjenester vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

Personverntjenester legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

Ved bruk av databehandler (spørreskjemaleverandør, skylagring eller videosamtale) må behandlingen oppfylle kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29. Bruk leverandører som din institusjon har avtale med.

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: <https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema>

Du må vente på svar fra oss før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

Personverntjenester vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Appendix C: Discussion paper Bjørnar Berg

Discussion paper – Bjørnar Berg

Theme: Responsible

Our master's thesis is called "Coopetition during times of crisis". Coopetition is a portmanteau of the words competition and cooperation. It is a phenomenon that has been around for a long time but wasn't recognized until originally coined by Raymond J. Noorda in the 1980s (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016), before Adam M. Brandenburger and Barry J. Nalebuff conceptualized the idea when they wrote the book named "Co-opetition" in 1996 (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996). The paper is about the COVID-19 pandemic which has been ravaging the globe since the start of 2020 and what impact it has had on coopetition. In this qualitative study we endeavor to find answers to the following research questions:

Research Question 1:

Did formation and continuation of coopetition change with the COVID-19 outbreak?

Research Question 2:

Can coopetition strategies utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic benefit in a post-pandemic setting?

Our thesis aims to shed light on the antecedents of coopetition and how these antecedents change when crisis occurs, as well as the consequences of coopetition. We want to study whether the pandemic has created new circumstances that change pre-existing coopetitions or have an impact on new coopetition strategies. Whether there is an increase in new coopetitions or perhaps a decrease. It is important to first understand the impact the pandemic has had on coopetition as a whole, to be better suited to answer the question of whether the strategies utilized during the pandemic can benefit in a post-pandemic setting. The study is a qualitative study which was chosen to better understand the intricacies of the strategies that our interview objects use. We hope that our study will be useful for future research on the topic and give business owners a helping hand when considering coopetition as a strategy for their specific needs. We want the study to be an aid when the next global crisis occurs.

What does the word responsible mean to me? In the English Oxford Dictionary there is a definition of the word. It is stated as *“having the job or duty of doing something or taking care of somebody/something, so that you may be blamed if something goes wrong”*. This definition exonerates everyone who is not appointed or have taken upon themselves a task or duty. If this is the definition of responsible, one cannot expect **anyone** to be responsible. In the sense of the assignment, I assume that this definition isn't what you are looking for. I think the word responsible is meant as a duty or task that we as the human race are obliged to take upon us. That everyone is called to action to take ownership and responsibility upon themselves, regardless of whether we want to or not, that it is an innate duty we have as humans to take care of each other and the world we live in. Least of all, one must take responsibility for one's own life. Blaming others for your own hardships is a losing game, until you can take the responsibility of your own life, you shouldn't try to save the world.

Our thesis relates to the word responsible, because it aims to help better understand the problems encountered during times of crisis and hardship. The aim is that the paper will give helpful advice both in a setting of normalcy and crisis. In my opinion it is responsible to help prepare the world in any way for the next pandemic or global crisis. Of course, our thesis doesn't find any definitive answers, so it would be irresponsible of me to claim that it will save businesses or people in the next crisis, but I hope it will help a sliver at least.

In regard to the topic we are studying, coopetition, there are heaps of ethical dilemmas. One of them is that many people seem to be under the impression that coopetition is an illegal and irresponsible activity, due to big brands collaborating on pricing of goods and services, which is a form of coopetition. Cooperating on pricing in such a manner gives the brands too much power to increase prices to a level which is neither sustainable nor responsible. There have been various news reports on Norwegian grocery brands which have been a part of illegal price collaborations, where Norgesgruppen ASA, Coop Norge SA and REMA 1000 AS were warned with fines of respectively 8,8 billion NOK, 4,8 billion NOK and 7,4 billion NOK (Norum, Lorch-Falch, Sættem, Vik Helgheim, 2020). They have used so-called “Price-hunters”, who are employed to go into a competitor's store and gather information about their prices on products which is sent to the headquarters. “Konkurransetilsynet”, has deemed this to be a way for the grocers to increase the prices, rather than increase competition as the brands say (Norum, et.al., 2020).

Another subject to talk about on the topic of coopetition, is that coopetition is a strategy that can help small businesses in their beginning stages. It gives the opportunity for more to join and compete

with the big brands that own most of the market share. If more businesses can grow, it can take away some of the power from the huge corporations which have irresponsible amounts of power. Therefore, in the right hands, I think cooptation can be a highly responsible way of conducting business. However, as we saw in the example above, cooptations with malice intents has the possibility of doing much harm. Therefore, it is important that every person takes responsibility for our actions and make sure that our endeavors are ethical in nature.

The ethical challenges of our research questions can relate to the cooptations started in the beginning of the pandemic with various vaccine-manufacturers. For example, the partnership that emerged between Pfizer and BioNTech (Pfizer, 2020), this partnership might on the surface seem like the most responsible thing to do to get vaccines against the illness as soon as possible. However, could the vaccines have been better and available for the public earlier if the leading companies in vaccine research all went together to find the best vaccine? We can also ask questions whether the competition aspect of vaccine research is responsible. The general public opinion about the role of medical companies is to develop effective and efficient medicines to fight illnesses. The ethical problem, however, is that the main objective of medical companies is to provide profit for their stakeholders (Friedman, 1970). Therefore, the medical systems as it is today, might be irresponsible.

Ethical challenges related to our thesis could be that since we are doing a qualitative study with only 5 respondents our conclusions will not be based on a big enough data sample to be representative for businesses in general. Since our limited time frame has constrained us in conducting a study of the upmost quality, I think there is an ethical challenge in publishing a study with so few respondents, as it might give false results.

One of our points of focus was on the antecedent to cooptation called, “cooptation-oriented mindset”. This gave an interesting result, especially with one of our respondents, namely a nursing home. Only one of five of the respondents noticed a change in regard to cooptation-oriented mindset when the pandemic hit. This respondent said that the employees changed their unwillingness to cooperate even with other departments of the organization to being enthusiastic about working at another nursing home temporarily when there was extra need due to COVID-19 infections. This is particularly interesting that this change happened in a nursing home, where one might be inclined to think that the employees are more empathetic than in most other industries. The change in cooptation-oriented mindset shows how the nurses were willing to take responsibility in times of crisis.

In the subject we had during our master's programme, Sustainable Capitalism, we were taught to think about sustainability and to strive towards a sustainable future for the world. This subject aimed at giving us the tools and knowledge to be able to act responsibly in meeting the work life, so that we together can have a world that we would want to live in. Responsibility has been a pillar-stone in our education which has in some ways shaped us to become more responsible as humans than our ancestors were thought to be. Not because they wouldn't want to be responsible, but because they didn't know that the world was in danger.

To summarize, our master thesis is aimed at giving valuable knowledge to business owners and researchers in terms of coopetition, especially in a crisis. Hopefully it will give some insights into the changes in coopetition one can expect to see when crisis occurs and be better suited of handling the challenges that come with drastic market changes either through coopetition or if the best course of action is to avoid coopetition.

I think that the price collaborations that Norgesgruppen, Coop and REMA 1000 was warned about is one of the things that taints the word coopetition. Coopetition has in my experience many good traits. It gives small businesses the chance to grow and become responsible actors in the business sphere.

To conclude this discussion, I think that the master's programme I have went through here at the University of Agder has been very educational. One of the things I've learned more than I could imagine about is sustainability and responsibility. I think that this programme has prepared me to think about sustainability and responsibility for the world. And our Master thesis has hopefully given at least a sliver of knowledge to the future researchers and business owners that will use it.

Lastly, I want to thank the University of Agder for providing me with the opportunity to learn about economics, marketing, sustainability, and responsibility. When I started my journey, five years ago I was just a mere puppy, longing for the tools to give me a chance in the real world. I needed to learn and grow as a person. Therefore, I am grateful for my five years at the university. Over the course of these five years, I have grown a lot and become a more adult, better version of myself. I am happy now that these five years have passed that I am more suited than I was, to go out into the "real world" and work to make a change for myself and then for the community.

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Appendix D: Discussion paper Markus Osmundsen

Discussion paper – Markus Osmundsen

Theme: International

Our master thesis “Coopetition during times of crisis” is our final project in the completion of the master’s programme in Business Administration from the School of Business and Law at the University of Agder. This discussion paper is my own reflections addressing how the concept of “international” relates to our thesis. I will next briefly present our thesis, before I then discuss which current international trends and forces that are of relevance to the master thesis.

Our master thesis is a qualitative study about how coopetition relationships are affected during market crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique opportunity to study market crisis behavior as the whole world were/are affected by its consequences. We were initially not familiar with the topic of coopetition, which was largely a part of why I wanted to write on the topic, as I find it interesting to discover new knowledge. When we started doing the literature review in our research, we were surprised about the hugely amount of prior literature on the field of coopetition. It did however strike us that the topic is subject to being unclear and complex, even in paper review frameworks. There is very little literature on how coopetition behaves in market crisis, and for that reason it has been motivating to write the thesis.

The aim of the thesis was to discover how coopetition potentially behaved differently during crisis than under normal market conditions. Coopetition is term that was first conceptualized in the book named “Co-opetition” by Adam M. Brandenburger and Barry J. Nalebuff in 1996 (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996). Since 1996 there have been multiple conceptualizations and definitions on coopetition at various network and firm levels. The essence of it still holds true to Brandenburger and Nalebuffs definition which is considered as the reference work for coopetition. Coopetition is a composition of the term coopetition and competition. The idea is that as an organization it is possible to gain benefits by having some level of collaboration with competitors. This can happen at many levels, even without organizations even realizing it. We have the following as research questions in our master thesis:

Research Question 1:

Did formation and continuation of coopetition change with the COVID-19 outbreak?

Research Question 2:

Can coopetition strategies utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic benefit in a post-pandemic setting?

In answering these research questions, we conducted a qualitative study where we interviewed the managers of five different organizations. By theme categorizing antecedents (key driving forces) and consequences of their coopetitive relations we were able to systemically work with data, which we could rank by frequency of occurrence in data and in what level we found it relevant for the topic of coopetition during crisis. It was important to differ on what antecedents and consequences that belonged to the crisis, and which did not.

Our findings suggested that some antecedents and consequences of coopetition played a key role during the COVID-19 pandemic, more than during normal market circumstances. To feature a specific theme, the consequence flexibility was especially notable. The flexibility gained from coopetition made the organizations better suited to withstand the impact on the business market of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study did not reveal explicit support for specified strategies implemented during the pandemic that also would work in normal circumstances, but some of the consequences from the coopetition during the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as positive long-term. Multiple of the sample organizations had a good experience from utilizing coopetition as strategy during the pandemic, and some gained long-term coopetition agreements because of it.

The concept of international

There are some international trends and forces that are of relevance to the master thesis. When thinking about internationalization, the very first thing that comes to mind is digitalization. It has been going on for decades, but the change of pace has in my opinion never been so rapid as the last two decades after the dotcom bubble. Never have the world been so small because of online communication. During the world global COVID-19 pandemic there have been a rapid spike in usage of online communicating software, allowing employees and leaders to work remotely from home, or skip long distance travels for work projects and meetings. This have been an eye-opener, showing the how digital capabilities can be when used in practice in everyday work life. This is a change that likely have come to stay. Even in one of our interviews in our research we did an online interview using the video communication software "Zoom". This was not out of social distancing restrictions, but because of convenience.

Another effect of the international digitalization is the connection of marketplaces worldwide. While previously organizations would mostly reach customer in its own region, they now in many instances competes against companies all over the world for customers, sharpening the competition. To then stay competitive, clever business strategies must be implemented. I believe the increasing research literature and implementation of cooperation can partly be own due to digitalization. In the research results of our master thesis, we saw that for some organizations there was an extensive usage of digital tools and work methods. This was especially true for the accounting and consulting firm that was characterized by high usage of accounting software and systems, as well as online professional accounting forums. When the social distancing restrictions was implemented in Norway, it was easy for the accounting and consulting firm to adapt rapidly to home offices. The organization in the ventilation industry also used digital tools every day, adapting to home offices during the pandemic. The manager noted that the organization likely will continue with home offices in future, also after the pandemic.

There are obviously one single international forces that are of highest relevance to our master thesis, which is the COVID-19 virus, as it is a main feature of the research questions we are exploring. It has dramatically changed everyday life for people all over the world, where over 6 200 000 people have been registered deceased a result of COVID-19 according to the WHO (2022). In regard to the business market, there have been many implications. Our interviews with the organizations in our study highlights some of these. Some of the organizations experienced complete shutdown of market demand, while others had such high demands it was difficult to supply the market. Here cooperation agreements could help mitigate the issues the organizations faced, which we saw it did in our study.

The organizations reported that their cooperation agreements gave positive consequences during the pandemic such as cost reduction, better market access and knowledge sharing to mention a few central themes. This in turn allowed for flexibility which made the organizations quick to adapt to the new circumstances during the crisis. A unique consequence of cooperation that is specific for the COVID-19 pandemic is how the small organizations made clear that collaborating with competitors during the pandemic yielded in what was experienced as positive social interaction. When there were social distancing restrictions at Norwegians residents' leisure time, meeting people at work was for some people the only social interaction they had. The pandemic made organizations looking for strategic options, where cooperation could be one of them. In our study one of the organizations did not have any prior experience with cooperation, but at the outbreak of the pandemic, there was such change in workload that they were almost forced into a cooperative agreement.

Summary and conclusion

In this discussion paper for our master thesis “Coopetition during times of crisis”, I have briefly presented the thesis and discussed how and which current international trends and forces that are of relevance to the master thesis. Even though the sample rate was small in our qualitative study, the study has contributed to the narrow field of coopetition in markets during crises by showing how this kind of research can be conducted, as well as highlighting some antecedents and consequence that are of importance to the topic. This should help pave way for further research.

The concept of “International” is quite broad, but there are some trends and forces that stands out. The major trend that has been shaping the global business market in the last decades, and that can be said to be a megatrend (Lexico, 2020), is digitalization. It has connected marketplaces all over the world, making the competitive market increasingly fierce. It has also shaped the way employees work as we also have seen in our study. The change from working at workplaces to home offices is also a new trend that has been amplified and really been set to practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also not possible to talk about international forces without mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic. In our study we have found that the added flexibility obtained from coopetition played a key role in the pandemic. The different organizations in our study were able to withstand financial stress and very volatile market conditions because of their coopetition agreements. We should of course however be careful being too conclusive, as the sample size in our qualitative study was very low, and thus not well suited for drawing general conclusions. I believe it is fair to say the coopetition have been influenced by multiple international trends and forces and stands as a viable reasonable strategy for dealing with crises in the business market.

To finalize this discussion paper, I would like to thank the of Business and Law at the University of Agder for 5 years of education in Business Administration. During this time, I have finished over 30 subjects in a wide variety of fields. Out of all these, many of them have had an international focus, preparing the students for meeting a global business market were mastering the English language and understanding the concept of international is very valuable.

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