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Developing and utilizing coopetitive relationships: Evidence from small and medium-sized enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

The study proposes the notion of coopetition capability as an ability to cooperate and compete with rival firms simultaneously. We draw on the tenets of the resource-based and dynamic capability theories as well as insights from in-depth qualitative studies of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) in two Sub-Saharan African markets – Kenya and Zambia – to explore the conceptual domain of the coopetitive capability phenomenon. We further examine how external and internal environmental forces trigger the development of coopetition capability, and how coopetitive capability contributes to firm success outcomes. Findings from the study indicate that coopetitive capability is manifested in SMEs' ability to proactively develop, coordinate, and learn from portfolios of inter-firm relationships with competitors. The study further finds that interactivities between regulatory requirements, customer demands, and firm-specific learning processes are major triggers of SMEs' propensities to develop and benefit from coopetition capability. The study extends the literature on inter-organizational relationships by highlighting the conceptual domain and drivers of coopetition capability.

1. Introduction

The literature on inter-organizational cooperation recognizes coopetition (or co-opetition) as a new way of doing business, where cooperation occurs between competing firms (e.g., Bouncken & Kraus, 2013; Corbo et al., 2022; Mathias et al., 2018). The coopetition concept, therefore, captures the notion of simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and competition (Crick & Crick, 2020; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014) and is generally viewed as a viable resource-pooling strategy that enhances firm competitiveness and growth (Gernsheimer et al., 2021; Gnyawali & Park, 2011). Brandenburger and Nalebuff (2021) argue that evidence of increasing inter-operating activities across multiple industries means that competing organizations must cooperate to ensure that their products work together in pursuit of greater market value.

A case in point is the computer industry, where it has become common for competitors to set aside competitive rivalry to work together for mutual benefits. For example, Apple Computer linked its capability to design easy-to-use computer products with Sony's miniaturization capability, as neither firm could develop the PowerBook individually (Dyer & Singh, 2000). More recently, Honest Tea agreed to make a private-label tea for Safeway knowing that this deal will eat into existing Honest Tea sales at Safeway (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 2021), while Apple and Google joined forces to develop a Bluetooth-based contact tracing platform to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic (Apple, 2020). Due to uncertainties associated with technological innovations, firms in this business manage uncertainty by cooperating with competitors to access and exchange resources and spread risk related to developing and launching new technology products. In other

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words, the coopetition logic proposes that businesses must abandon fighting over the division of the pie (customers) and focus on strategies to grow the pie, burying the hatchet and taking up the olive branch of peace (Henricks, 1996).

The role of coopetition may be of particular interest to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing economies. Firms in these contexts face increased vulnerability to environmental shocks, sudden changes in regulations, disruptions from new technologies, limited resource bases, and shifting customer needs and expectations (Boso et al., 2013; Crick & Crick, 2020; Hoskisson et al., 2000). In contrast to prior strategy research that has occurred largely in the context of developed economies, this study advances knowledge on the coopetition practices of SMEs in Kenya and Zambia, two developing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). We contend that differences in institutional, political, socio-cultural, and economic conditions across developed and developing economies may have major implications for organizational theories promulgated to inform firms in developed and developing economy settings. For example, while coopetition may be expected to be more challenging in SSA economies due to weaknesses in institutional structures (Monticelli et al., 2023), it could be argued that the highly collectivistic and communal socio-cultural structures in SSA may render coopetition capability a key success factor in this context (Kawimbe, 2022; Lu et al., 2021).

While coopetition studies in the context of developed economies abound, the lack of coopetition research in developing economies has denied scholars a broader theoretical and empirical evaluation of the dynamics of the coopetition phenomenon. Thus, exploring coopetition in the context of developing economies not only brings a new perspective to scholarly discussions on the triggers of coopetition behaviors but also conveys a timely response to several appeals to organizational researchers to embrace developments in interesting but under-researched settings (e.g., Mesquita & Lazzarini, 2008; Wright et al., 2005). More specifically, due to this context's apparent novelty, Nachum et al. (2022) highlight "the theory of the interesting" as a launch pad to study various phenomena in SSA. Drawing insights from the latest developments in the area (e.g., Kamoche & Wood, 2023; Nachum et al., 2022), this study contends that coopetition research has rarely been understood from the SSA context. Yet this setting has the potential to extend (or even challenge) conventional assumptions and generate new theory about internal and external environment forces that trigger SMEs' propensity to develop coopetition capabilities in pursuit of increased competitiveness and performance.

While a coopetition strategy may help SMEs generate mutual and individual business successes (Mathias et al., 2018; Ritala et al., 2014) due to the severe resource limitations that confront such firms in low-resource settings, research shows that coopetition may occur among such firms under conditions of regulatory change, technology turbulence, and institutional weakness (Gnyawali & Park, 2009; Virtanen & Kock, 2022). For example, Bouncken and Kraus (2013) argue that many SMEs have competed with larger firms and even penetrated protected market territories because of their ability to cooperate to create market value.

Despite the heightened interest in the coopetition phenomenon, a review of extant inter-firm cooperation literature shows evidence of divergent understanding of the phenomenon as well as an inconsistent account of its drivers, contingencies, and organizational outcomes. These shortcomings have prompted scholars to call for additional research on the topic (e.g., Corbo et al., 2022). A major concern is that, despite the recognized importance of organizational practices in generating an environment in which competition and cooperation can co-occur, scholarly research on the coopetition phenomenon is limited (Padula & Dagnino, 2007; Corbo et al., 2022), particularly in its manifestation in SMEs competing in developing economies (Padula & Dagnino, 2007; Park et al., 2014).

Given the paucity of research on the coopetition phenomenon, particularly in SME and developing economy settings, this study uses an in-depth qualitative approach to address the following research questions: (1) how does coopetition capability manifest itself in SMEs; (2) what are its consequences; (3) how can it be fostered; and (4) under what circumstances? It relies on grounded theory development techniques to explore the conceptual domain, triggers, and outcomes of the coopetition capability phenomenon, using the competition and cooperation between SMEs in two SSA economies (i.e., Kenya and Zambia) as empirical settings. In so doing, the study contributes to the literature on inter-firm relationships in general, and coopetition in particular. Given the complexities and uncertainties that characterize cooperative relationships between competitors, the study informs SME managers and policy makers on how to enhance the competitiveness and performance of SMEs through coopetition arrangements in highly collectivistic and communal societies. Since coopetition can have value-enhancing and value-destroying implications (Crick & Crick, 2020; Monticelli et al., 2023), this study provides SMEs with implementable insights regarding their cooperation with competitors and how this can improve their performance.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we review the inter-organizational cooperation literature incorporating insights from the small business literature on coopetition. Second, we explain the study's methodology and the various steps followed to analyze the insights gathered. Third, we present and discuss the findings resulting from our analysis and develop specific research propositions. Fourth, we outline the study's theoretical contributions, derive managerial implications from the study findings, discuss the study's limitations, and offer suggestions for future research in the area. Finally, we provide conclusions based on our research findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous research on the coopetition phenomenon

2.1.1. Background to coopetitive relationships

Extant scholarly research on inter-organizational relationships has broadly considered competition and cooperation as existing independently and oppositionally (Barney, 2001; Chen, 2008; Porter, 1980; Miehe et al., 2023). Often, it is argued that one relationship harms the other. The competitive perspective assumes that firms have divergent interests that prompt a propensity to pursue self-interest-oriented behaviors. On the other hand, cooperation emphasizes collaboration between organizations rather than competition. It assumes that a firm's performance can be enhanced by pooling complementary resources and capabilities from other firms (Hanna & Walsh, 2008). However, studies have argued against the conventional view of competition and cooperation as independent and oppositional (e.g., Bengtsson & Johansson, 2012; Gernsheimer et al., 2021), with the contention that competition and cooperation may co-occur. This third perspective on the inter-firm relationship has been introduced to the strategy lexicon, premised on the idea that competing firms may cooperate to create mutual and individual values. Coopetition is, therefore, framed as a synthesis between the competitive and the cooperative views and viewed as an integrative framework (Crick et al., 2022; Padula & Dagnino, 2007) that provides a more realistic and accurate picture of inter-firm relationships.

2.1.2. Coopetition among SMEs

Limited access to core resources, restricted market presence, marketplace illegitimacy, and greater dependence on narrow product and service lines have been noted as major challenges undermining the growth prospects of SMEs (Bruton, 2010; Bruton & Rubanik, 2002; Eggers, 2020). Scholars have argued that SMEs may boost their growth prospects by cooperating with other firms in vertical inter-firm alliances while, at same time, building horizontal cooperative relationships with competitors to pool core resources (e.g., Bouncken & Kraus, 2013; Hultman et al., 2023; Virtanen & Kock, 2022). The logic is that, since competing firms are likely to face similar challenges, they may possess diverse resources and capabilities that may benefit each other (Crick & Crick, 2020). Therefore, it makes sense for competing firms to cooperate to enhance their collective ability to create market value.

2.1.3. Risks associated with coopetition

While the literature indicates that SMEs may benefit from a coopetitive strategy, some scholars suggest that coopetition may be inimical to the survival of SMEs. For instance, Gnyawali and Park (2009) suggest that, while coopetition may help SMEs improve economies of scale, reduce marketplace uncertainty and risk, and speed up market entry of new products, the risk of technology theft, the challenge of management style misfit, and the loss of focal firm control may cost SMEs for cooperating with competitors. While acknowledging the benefits of coopetition to SMEs, Tomlinson and Fai (2013) argue that coopetition comes with risks, such as technology leakage to rivals and loss of control over a firm's innovation process. In addition, Bouncken and Kraus (2013) find that coopetition can indeed trigger and, at the same time, limit the introduction of radical innovations. A more recent review of the literature by Gernsheimer et al. (2021) shows that coopetition has both value-enhancing and value-diminishing effects. These equivocal findings suggest that coopetition can be both beneficial and costly for SMEs.

2.1.4. Coopetition management competence

Given that coopetition comes with benefits and costs, the competence required to manage successful coopetitive relationships has been highlighted in the extant literature (e.g., Bicen et al., 2021). A contention is that a greater competence in coopetition relationship management may help firms, particularly SMEs, maximize coopetition's benefits and contain its costs (Seran et al., 2016). Recent coopetition studies have drawn attention to a firm's coopetition management mechanisms that may facilitate successful coopetitive relationships (e.g., Bengtsson & Johansson, 2012; Virtanen & Kock, 2022). For example, Bengtsson and Johansson's (2012) study demonstrates that SMEs need to develop alliance portfolio management capabilities to survive in coopetitive relationships with larger firms. Gnyawali and Park (2011) rely on evidence from a few firms to suggest that coopetition capability development is necessary for effective management of coopetitive relationships. Bengtsson et al. (2016) provide evidence on how coopetition capability moderates the relationship between coopetition paradox and external tension and reduces internal tension. More recently, Raza-Ullah et al. (2019) found that firms who possess coopetition capability can minimize the negative performance effect of paradoxical tension in coopetitive relationships.

2.1.5. Deficiencies in the coopetition literature

While the existing literature has advanced knowledge on the coopetition phenomenon, several areas need additional scholarly work. In particular, knowledge is lacking on how SMEs develop and benefit from coopetition management competencies. In addition, the literature is decidedly silent on the processes SMEs use to manage relationships with competitors. In addition, limited knowledge exists on the major internal and external environment forces that give rise to the emergence of coopetitive relationships among SMEs. Furthermore, while many societies in the global south are noted for their collectivistic and communal socio-cultural institutional structures that shape the behavior of individuals and firms (Omobowale & Omobowale, 2019), there is limited research shedding light on how coopetition unfolds in such societies, particularly SSA. Thus, although the overall importance of managing inter-firm relationships has been recognized in the broad inter-firm cooperation literature, the few that have examined coopetition in SMEs (e.g., Bouncken & Kraus, 2013; Gnyawali & Park, 2009) are silent on how coopetition capability is conceptualized and defined as well as how it manifests itself in the context of SMEs competing and cooperating in less developed societies. This study seeks to advance the coopetition literature by addressing these deficiencies.

2.2. Theoretical underpinnings: Integrating the resource-based theory and dynamic capability perspective

We draw insights from the resource-based theory and the dynamic capability perspective to delineate the conceptual domain of the coopetition capability concept. The resource-based theory suggests that a firm is a bundle of valuable and inimitable idiosyncratic resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989; Teece et al., 1997). While resources may be bundled to generate capabilities that are unique to firms, such capabilities can become increasingly dynamic. Dynamic capabilities may consist of specific strategic and organizational processes, including product development, alliancing, and strategic decision making that creates value for firms within active markets by manipulating resources into new value-creating strategies (Teece et al., 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Zollo & Winter, 2002). Thus, building on the theoretical foundation of dynamic capabilities, this study focuses on explaining firm's endowed processes and routines that generate the capability to manage cooperative relationships with competitors. In so doing, we enhance knowledge on coopetition success outcomes. The understanding is that the ability to manage collaborative relationships with competitors accelerates a firm's access to and transfer of knowledge and other core resources from competitors, which may be useful for a firm's performance.

Although active and constructive scholarly debate on the ontological assumptions of the coopetition concept is ongoing, which is healthy for scientific discourse (Bagozzi et al., 1991), the debate is currently silent on the processes that give rise to coopetition capability development. This lack of theoretical convergence and empirical work on the coopetition phenomenon suggests that a research agenda is justified to extend existing discourse on the coopetition phenomenon as a platform to launch an in-depth empirical inquiry. Guided by the resource-based theory and the dynamic capability view, we define *coopetition capability* as *an ability to manage cooperative relationships with competitors in an industry* (Gnyawali & Park, 2011).

We contend that a firm can internalize knowledge on coopetitive relationship management and knowledge from coopetitive partners to become efficient and effective in creating market value (Heimeriks & Duysters, 2004). Thus, we conceptualize coopetition capability as a dynamic, higher-order capability, aimed at integrating firm resources and functional capabilities to adapt firms to market dynamics. The resource-based theory helps explain how external market environment forces and internal firm-specific processes may trigger the development of this capability in SMEs. Therefore, the two theories are apposite in guiding our specification of the conceptual domain of coopetition capability, its development, and its consequences (Barney, 1991). Accordingly, we propose an antecedents-focal, construct–consequence framework to undertake an in-depth enquiry into the meaning, drivers, and implications of the coopetition capability phenomenon.

3. Methods

3.1. The SME setting

As mentioned earlier, many SMEs are increasingly burdened with severe resource limitations, threatened by changes in regulations and technology, and challenged by institutional dysfunctions that threaten their competitiveness. To this end, scholars (e.g., Gnyawali & Park, 2009; Bouncken & Kraus, 2013; Virtanen & Kock, 2022) have suggested that coopetition plays an important role in enhancing SME competitiveness. For example, it is argued that many small businesses successfully compete with large corporations and even penetrate protected market territories because they have a proclivity and an ability to join forces and are not preoccupied with beating competitors. While evidence points to a resurgence of coopetitive behavior in SMEs, a review of the coopetition literature reveals a paucity of research on the topic. Furthermore, in those few studies that have attempted to empirically examine SMEs' coopetitive practices, the findings have been largely inconsistent and inconclusive. Hence, it is important to understand the dynamics of the coopetition phenomenon in the SME sector.

3.2. The developing economy context

In contrast to most strategy research that has been undertaken in the context of developed economies, this study is based on the coopetition practices of SMEs in Kenya and Zambia, two developing economies in SSA. This research context has been chosen to study the nature and dynamics of the coopetition phenomenon for several reasons. First, studying coopetition in the context of a developing economy is a timely response to several appeals for organizational researchers to embrace developments in other regional settings in order to augment knowledge on organizational theories and practices (e.g., Mesquita & Lazzarini, 2008; Wright et al., 2005). While coopetition studies abound in the context of developed economies, the dearth of coopetition research in developing economies has denied scholars a broader theoretical and empirical insight into the coopetition phenomenon's dynamics. Clearly, because of the institutional, cultural, political, and economic differences between developed and developing economies, organizational theories promulgated for firms in developed market economies may or may not apply to firms in developing economies. For example, coopetition may be more challenging in developing economies due to weak, corrupt, and inefficient institutions (Monticelli et al., 2023).

Second, the two developing country contexts in which this research is undertaken have recently experienced robust economic growth and capital inflows (Monticelli et al., 2023). As with many other developing economies, these countries are implementing the International Monetary Fund/World Bank's recommended structural adjustment programs, which include monetary and banking reforms, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and removal of import and foreign exchange restrictions (World Bank, 2020). This has inevitably shaped the managerial assumptions and the decision-making processes of many firms, including decisions on how to cooperate with other firms to create and deliver market value effectively and efficiently. Thus, Zambia and Kenya have similar characteristics, providing this research with suitable case scenarios to investigate the dynamics of the coopetition phenomenon in the context of developing economies (Hoskisson et al., 2000).

Third, strong collectivistic cultures are evident in Kenya and Zambia, with most people considering themselves as social actors rather than individualists. They are more willing to cooperate and share communal values (Ryu et al., 2011; Lu et al., 2021; Kawimbe, 2022). Therefore, gaining a competitive advantage through network relationships and ties with market and non-market players is an important focus of firms in these economies (Acquaah, 2007). Consequently, coopetition takes on instrumental relevance in these two countries.

4. Research design

In selecting the research design, we considered the nature of our research questions (how coopetition capability is manifested in SMEs; what are its consequences, and how can it be fostered and under what circumstances?), the paucity of relevant studies on coopetition (that is, an area of coopetition for which extant research is incomplete and inadequate), and our intended theoretical contribution to the research stream. To answer our research questions, it was essential to identify a methodological approach that provided an opportunity to identify specific manifestations of coopetition capability, its sources, and its consequences. Additionally, we needed a system that enabled us to identify circumstances under which coopetition capability is useful to SMEs. Consequently, we reasoned that an in-depth qualitative research design is the most suitable methodological approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Due to the difficulty in identifying a single database on SMEs in both countries, we endeavored to build our sampling frame from government agencies. While these government sources provided contacts for SMEs, it was evident that most of the records were dated because several firms had changed location and/or telephone numbers. Therefore, a combination of convenience sampling and snowballing was employed. SMEs drawn from government registers served as initial contacts, and referrals from initially contacted SMEs were relied upon to identify additional respondents. Although prone to biases, this approach is recommended by several small business scholars as a more appropriate sampling procedure where it is challenging to create a useful sampling frame to generate a sufficient level of response (e.g., Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013; Neneh, 2018). Accordingly, we selected the study's cases based on criterion sampling, a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). The process involves selecting cases that meet a set of a priori criteria that are critical to finding answers to the research questions. In this case, we ensured that the selected SMEs: (1) employed between 10 and 250 employees; (2) had a history of cooperating with a competitor in its industry; and (3) operated in a developing economy market. We describe a competitor as any organization in the same industry offering similar products or services to satisfy the exact same customer needs (Xu et al., 2013). In short, we focused our investigation on SMEs' past and current inter-firm relational activities with direct competitors in the same industry.

In cases where it was difficult to locate key participants with in-depth knowledge of a firm's cooperation with a competitor, the chief executive officers or senior managers were relied on to identify potential key participants (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Following Creswell's (2014) suggested sample size range of 3 to 30 for contemporary qualitative research, a sample of 25 SMEs (15 in Zambia and 10 in Kenya), was included in the study because the novelty in the findings from subsequent interviews in each country was marginal, providing evidence of data saturation. Zambia and Kenya have similar economic and social development characteristics and, thus, sampling in these countries enabled us to capture and focus on coopetition-specific factors in the context of developing economies.

Table 1 describes the 25 SMEs included in the study. The firms studied operated in various industries and cooperated with competitors in different areas of their business operation. The firms are predominantly young entrepreneurial SMEs at the growth stage. They operated in a variety of industries (including media, aviation, construction, branding, higher education, healthcare, tourism, real estate, telecommunication, mining, and automotive parts distribution). The firms varied in size, with specific employee numbers ranging between 10 and 212 (see Table 1), consistent with the SME definition in developing economy contexts (Fjose et al., 2010). With these variations, we were able to uncover potential differences in the coopetition practices across a variety of SME firms.

4.1. Data collection

We followed Yin's (1989) recommendation of using multiple sources of evidence to address a broader range of research questions. The multiple cases approach is also supported by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) who contended that it promoted better and more empirical evidence-grounded theory development. We obtained evidence from various data sources, including multiple face-to-face interviews, a detailed review of company internal documents, and media reports on the firms' cooperative activities.

4.1.1. Face-to-face in-depth interviews

An interview guide was developed and used to consistently capture specific broad themes in our in-depth interviews with the participants, helping to ensure the consistency of findings in our two research sites. We drew insights from the coopetition literature on the concepts and theories of our study topic to develop a list of questions that covered each of the main research questions. Two researchers, one in each country, with appropriate educational levels, training, experiential

Table 1
Description of Sample.

No.	Firm	Areas of cooperation	Location (Country)	Number of employees	Years in Business
1.	Television Company (TC)	Signal cost sharing; Equipment and/or technical support; Employee training.	Zambia	189	12
2.	Civil and Building Contracting Company (CBCC)	Subcontracting; credit facilities; equipment and technical know-how; facilitation of some works due to connections.	Zambia	42	7
3.	Telecom Company (TEC)	Tender submission, Subcontracting, technical support alliances, information sharing.	Zambia	39	10
4.	Construction Company (CC)	Subcontracting.	Zambia	35	6
5.	Higher Education Institution (HEI)	Education products, selection of students, information, advertising, materials, and facilities.	Zambia	63	22
6.	Medical Centre (MC)	Referral points; equipment; information sharing second opinion.	Zambia	22	11
7.	Air Travel Company (ATC)	Ticketing.	Zambia	16	4
8.	Mining and Construction (M&C)	Supply of raw materials; negotiations with the government organization of trade and mining shows.	Zambia	110	15
9.	Surgery (SU)	Referrals; equipment; second opinion.	Zambia	17	13
10.	Tour Operator (TO)	Ticketing.	Zambia	13	3
11.	Mining Company 1 (MC1)	Credit facility, employee training, information exchange.	Zambia	19	6
12.	Research & Development (R&D)	Products materials and equipment human resource.	Zambia	27	8
13.	Mining company (MC2)	Supply of products, pricing discounts, training of employees, advertising, organizing of trade shows.	Zambia	89	23
14.	Electrical Equipment Manufacturing Company (EEMC)	Subcontracting.	Zambia	46	9
15.	Radio Station (RS)	Technical support, equipment organizing live shows, organizing end of year parties.	Zambia	28	5
16.	Insurance Brokerage Company (IBC)	Pricing (competitor's commission), product design, selling at joint ventures.	Kenya	75	22
17.	Healthcare Consultancy (HC)	Product delivery.	Kenya	15	10
18.	Public Relations Consultancy (PRC)	Limited capacity.	Kenya	10	2
19.	Real Estate Company (REC)	Information sharing, strategy development, product and service development, pricing policy, customer service, employee training and education.	Kenya	25	2
20.	Auto Parts Manufacturer (APM)	Employee training; equipment sharing.	Kenya	88	8
21.	Internet Service Provider (ISP)	Service delivery, products and packaging, infrastructure, information.	Kenya	30	16
22.	Branding and Design (B&D)	Outsourcing.	Kenya	12	7
23.	Civil Engineering Company (CEC)	Design and/or supervision of engineering project.	Kenya	62	14
24.	Tours and Travel/car Hiring Company (TTHC)	Service delivery, database with drivers' information, technological upgrading.	Kenya	17	4
25.	Airline Company (AC)	Sales (Ticketing), baggaging.	Kenya	212	20

background, and familiarity with the coopetition subject and the country setting, conducted the interviews. The participants included chief executive officers, key account managers, key account co-ordinators, and corporate relations/relationship managers. Because these participants are senior managers in their respective organizations, we were confident that the information provided was accurate and comprehensive enough to capture the totality of the firms' cooperative engagements with competitors. Another benefit of this data source is that interviews provided the research with first-hand information on who was responsible for the firm's coopetitive relationships and their experiences managing those relationships. Overall, the interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min and were recorded and transcribed with verbatim notes immediately after each session.

Participants were asked to describe, in detail, how they managed their firm's relationships with competitors at the onset of the field study, followed by deliberations on the forces driving the firms to cooperate with their market rivals and the outcomes and conditioning factors of their cooperation with competitors.

4.1.2. Internal company archival sources

Furthermore, we examined company documents and media reports to validate the evidence gathered from the interviews on the investigated firms' management of cooperative activities with competitors. Consistent with the recommendations of Schultz (1995), archival data, including partnership agreements, notes from past meetings, documented codes of practice in the firms' inter-firm relationships, internal corporate presentations by key personnel, and trade press publications were analyzed for content and context. These secondary sources provided valuable insights not only into the content-related issues of management of cooperative relationships with competitors but also into the organizational and industry-specific context within which the SMEs operated.

4.2. Data analysis and quality of findings

We followed Dubois and Gadde (2002) in focusing on an analysis of the case study data by comparing the empirical evidence with relevant theories. Following Huberman and Miles (1994) and Yin (2013), we conducted within- and across-case analyses of the evidence gathered in a two-phase data analysis. The process involved writing up evidence for each case firm and an across-case analysis entailing a search for evidence of patterns across the case firms.

The first phase involved categorizing the data, including coding and analyzing interview transcripts, field notes, archival documents, and media reports with the aim of classifying and labeling data units into codes. After data collection was completed, the data was transcribed within 24 h of their occurrence to preserve the quality of information. The interview transcripts were analyzed afterwards to generate broad themes of coopetition capability dimensions, drivers, and outcomes. This involved identifying commonalities and differences across the different data sources for each case study firm and across the case firms. Accordingly, quotations from other interviews and evidence from archival and media sources related to a particular theme were coded for each case firm.

In phase two of the data analysis, we engaged in abstraction, whereby we collapsed and linked categories of themes into higher-order codes or concepts (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The third phase of the analysis entailed searching for evidence of similarities and differences across the multiple sources of evidence and exploring correspondence between the empirical data and established theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

This analysis stage also involved establishing procedures for dialogue between the acquired empirical data and the theory (Huberman & Miles, 1994). To this end, we followed the standard approach to develop matrices, linking theory to the empirical findings. A modification process was followed to adjust the categories and the generated theoretical framework when new information yielded a result inconsistent with previous findings. We repeated this process until we reached theoretical saturation.

Subsequently, in phase four of the analysis, we integrated the conceptual categories from the case studies into a theoretical framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). At this stage, we returned to the existing literature to identify relevant concepts to help us explain the basis of similarities and differences observed in the analysis in stage three. Ultimately, five themes were determined to capture the coopetition capability: inter-firm coopetition coordination, coopetition portfolio coordination, coopetition learning, coopetition proactiveness, and coopetition transformation. Additionally, three themes emerged to explain external and internal environmental forces that drive the propensity of SMEs to cooperate with competitors: regulatory requirements, increasing customer demands, and internal firm processes of learning to cooperate with competitors. Furthermore, the coopetitive relationship success code was identified from the data as a direct outcome of the firms' coopetition capability. In linking the empirical data, our logic, and existing theories, the theoretical framework in Fig. 1 subsequently emerged from our analysis.

Finally, we conducted two additional interviews in each country to confirm our preliminary findings. This was to ensure that we did not introduce analytical biases. We addressed potential informant bias in several ways. First, we interviewed informants who not only occupied senior positions in the firm but also were knowledgeable about the firms' coopetitive relationships. They were either in charge of managing the relationships or actively involved as part of the team working the relationships. Second, we used open-ended questioning of informants, and we primarily focused on recent coopetition activities to limit recall bias (Koriat & Goldsmith, 2000). Third, informants provided factual accounts of their coopetitive management activities, such as dates and minutes of meetings. In addition, we increased trustworthiness in our analyses by triangulating data sources, using member checks, and presenting our preliminary insights to 10 of the 25 participants interviewed (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014).

In the following sections, we present the key findings from the two SSA countries studied. The study aims to empirically establish how firms manage their cooperative relationships with competitors, drivers, and outcomes of their cooperation with competitors and not to compare results in the two countries. Therefore, a holistic approach was adopted to analyze and report the findings (see Appendix 1). This approach was appropriate not only because the two countries are broadly similar in terms of social and economic development and are both classified as developing countries (Masaki, 2018; Charles et al., 2017) but also because it enabled us to develop a more comprehensive model that could be used in the research settings of other developing economies. Moreover, consistent patterns emerged in our preliminary across-case analysis with no significant differences in results in the two study sites. We rely on the representative quotations in Table 2 and Table 3 and insights from established theories to develop propositions that link the concepts emerging from the empirical data. Fig. 1 provides a guiding framework to help structure our propositions. Although we refer to quotations whenever appropriate, we invite readers to look at Table 2 and Table 3 for detailed information.

5. Findings

5.1. Conceptual domains of coopetition capability

The participants suggested that cooperation with competitors benefited their business because they could share costs, learn from their competitors, and pool resources together to achieve mutual and individual firm goals. They also talked about the challenges they faced in their cooperative relationships with competitors:

"*It is challenging to work with our competitors, though it is something we cannot do without. This is because our competitors, especially the larger ones, control most of the decisions more. The relationships [with competitors] are*

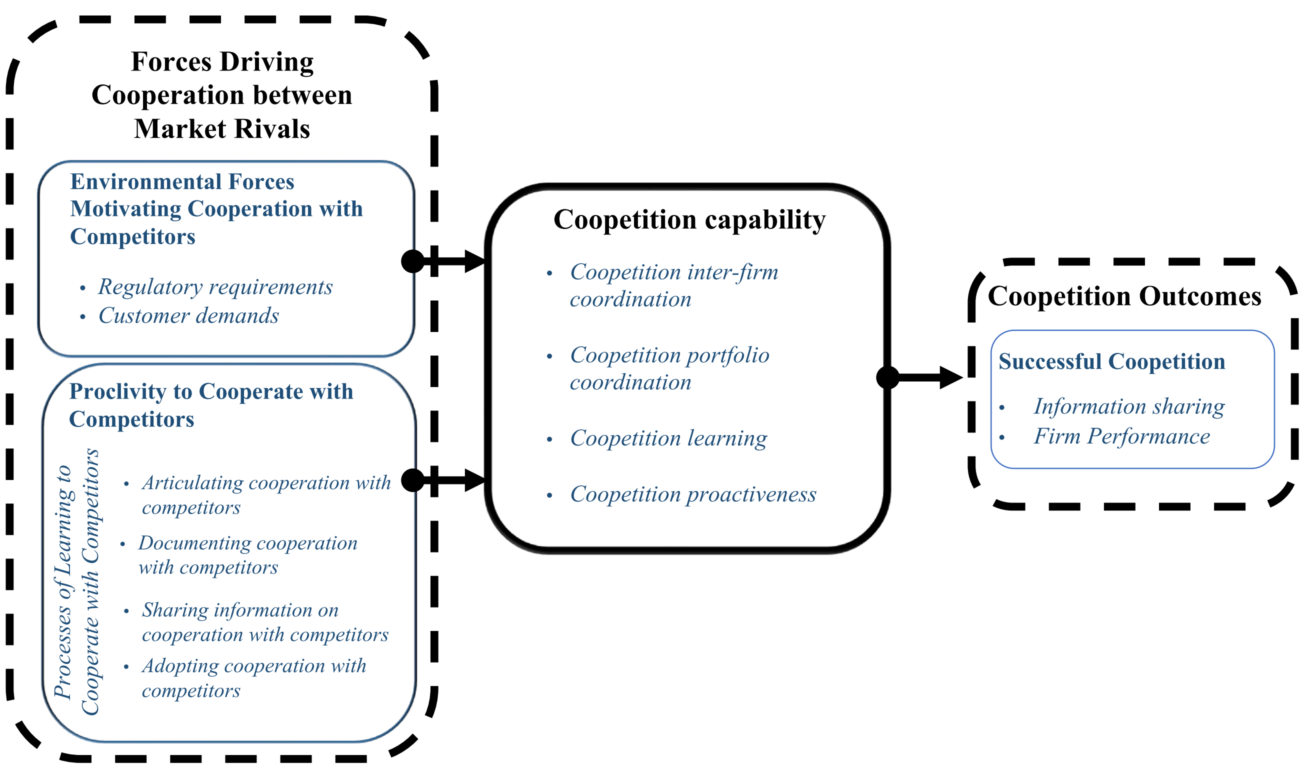

Fig. 1. Proposed Theoretical Framework.

Table 2
Selected word list for content analysis on the dimensions of coopetition capability.

Constructs	Content analysis words and codes to represent the companies
Coopetition capability dimensions	
Inter-firm coopetition coordination	- We do not have a department so to say. However, our **contracts manager is in charge** of identifying and entering into agreements with other companies. This person is also in charge of **managing the relationships, and informs all of us on any new relationship or any changes in the agreements**.[…]. The key thing is that the contracts manager **evaluates the contracts** before agreeing to enter into an agreement with potential partners. **CC.** We make sure we **monitor** performance of the cooperation during the course of the contracts. We have weekly and monthly performance reviews to check on the progress of the agreements. **EEMC.**
Coopetition portfolio coordination	- Our company has learnt to take time to do a **background check on all competitors** we cooperate with before any partnerships are formed. So that we **do not end up in relationships that should not have been there from the get**-go. **APM.** We have monthly **meetings** with our partners. This helps us in ironing out some critical issues. This helps to **narrow the gap and link up as information** is shared during the meetings. **HEI.**
Coopetition learning	- Also, through cooperation **HEI** has been able to **learn** from competitors and has grown in terms of student numbers. The learning has mainly been **through sharing notes with competitors** in meetings. We have Board of Studies meetings where our cooperating partners explain how they run their programs and **we benefit from that information**. **HEI.** **APM** has the ability to cooperate with competitors because the company is very open to competitors to come and **learn** from us and vice versa, which is the reason these relationships have been successful over the last eight years. **APM.** Cooperating with competitors is a strategy in the right direction because, apart from the lack of capacity to do it alone, we also get to **learn** a lot from each other while at the same time offering better solutions and understanding the market better. **ISP.** This is very beneficial because there is always something new to **learn** from a competitor, especially one who has been in business longer. The partnerships have been mutually beneficial. An example is where TTHC director **learnt** and **picked key information** from a competitor's director who has been in business for fifteen years; and in four years we are now bigger than a fifteen-year-old business, after **implementing the strategies learnt**. **TTHC.** We learn from them (cooperating competitors), **exchange knowledge** to expand business for example human resource. **CC.**
Coopetition proactiveness	- Our company has been **proactive** in doing background checks on all competitors before any partnerships are formed. **APM.** We cooperate with our competitors because of the resource constraints that we face. We have no choice but **to approach and enter** into agreements with our competitors who have the resources. **MC1.**
Coopetition transformation	- The agreements are revised and there is always **room for flexibility and change**. The accountant is in charge of managing the relationships. Communication is done within the firm to allow other colleagues know of the agreements. In short, there is information sharing at the inception of the contract especially with those concerned. **SU.** Key success factors for partnerships include **flexibility, information sharing**, and holding meetings to **review** the relationship. We are flexible in that we can **easily change the agreements** to our advantage. **HEI.**

not balanced and most expectations are unmet. For example, we usually experience delays in service delivery on the part of our competing partner." (Coordinator, HEI).

In addition, some participants indicated that cultural differences negatively affected their cooperation with competitors: "*Our conflicts are mainly culturally based. Differences in work values, for example, make it*

Table 3
Selected word list for content analysis on the drivers and outcomes of coopetition capability.

Constructs	Content analysis words and codes to represent the companies
Coopetition capability and relationship performance	- What it is, is that the contracts manager will evaluate the contracts before agreeing to enter into the agreement with the would-be partners. Lawyers are also consulted to advice on the legal implications before we could commit ourselves. This is to ensure that the relationship we have with our partners is successful. **CC.** We make sure we **monitor performance of the cooperation** during the course of the contract. We have weekly and monthly performance review meetings to check on the progress of the agreement. **EEMC.** **APM** has the ability to cooperate with competitors because the company is very open to competitors to come and learn from them and vice versa, which is the reason these **relationships have been successful** over the last eight years. **APM.**
Regulatory requirements	- We cooperate with foreign firms because of a **government requirement for local content**. The government requires that contracts are awarded to companies with more local or Zambian shareholders. **EEMC, MC2, TEC.**As a department, we are affiliated to a number of competing institutions. It is a **requirement** in Zambia that our institution is affiliated with a more experienced institution. **HEI**As a private clinic, we usually consult other clinics on certain issues to get a second opinion. This (second opinion) is a **requirement by law** for quality assurance. Therefore, we work with our competitors. **MC.** Cooperation with competitors is the way of the future for this industry, especially in the road sector where companies are being **forced by law** to work together. **CEC**
Customer demands	- Our cooperation with competitors is only when we cannot afford to work on our own to satisfy our **customers. TC.** To a larger extent, **customer demands** absolutely drive us to partner with competitors. **TC.** The need to **satisfy customers** motivates APM to work with competitors. The wide range of services is intertwined with high **customer demands**. **APM** High competition and **customer demand** are the two major reasons why we partner with competitors basically because customer needs keep changing, and you always want to give them the best solution – which you might only find with a competitor. **IS** High competition doesn't necessarily force companies in this industry to cooperate. It's largely due to the need to deliver the service within the required time and in the expected order and quality. But **customer demand** definitely plays a big role in forcing us to outsource our service to a competitor because many times we can't produce within the required time. **B&D**
Processes of learning to cooperate with competitors	- We have meetings with our partners. This helps to narrow the gap and link up. **Information is shared** with other members of staff during the Board of Studies. The coordinator reports to the head of department and information is shared internally to everyone during meetings. **HEI** **Information is shared** during the alliance meetings. These meetings are tight and usually last for five full days. In short, there is **information sharing** at the inception of the contract especially with those concerned. We are guided and directed by a **formal** contract. The monthly meetings help us in ironing out some critical issues. **TEC** Mainly as the business development manager, I inform the other managers on the relationships. This is done during meetings. **CBCC** Communication is done within the firm to let other members know of the agreements. In short, there is information sharing at the inception of the contract, especially with those concerned. **SU**

difficult to agree on certain issues. There is also a tendency of underrating our company on many issues." (Accounts manager, TEC). To mitigate these challenges while maximizing the benefits of the coopetitive relationships, the firms indicated that they developed routines to formally coordinate activities and account for resources invested in the coopetitive partnerships. When describing successful coopetition, the participants raised an issue relating to their competence in managing coopetitive arrangements. As the quotations in Table 2 highlight, the participants in both countries stressed the importance of their managerial competence in coordinating, learning, pre-empting, and restructuring their firms' coopetitive relationships.

We find that coopetition coordination enables the firms to harmonize and govern coopetitive activities with different partners: "*We do not have a department, so to say. However, our contracts manager is responsible for identifying and entering into agreements with other companies. [..] This person is also in charge of managing the relationships and informs all of us on any new relationship or changes in the agreements. […] the contracts manager evaluates the contracts before agreeing to agree with potential partners."* (Manager, CC). Another manager stated, *"We have monthly meetings with our partners. This helps us in ironing out some critical issues. This also helps to narrow the gap and link up as the information is shared during the meetings."* (Coordinator, HEI).

The data further reveals that coordination of inter-firm relationships was considered to operate on two levels: individual inter-firm relationship coordination, which we name in this study as *coopetition inter-firm coordination*, and portfolio relationship coordination, which we denote as *coopetition portfolio coordination*. Evidence suggests that, while coopetition inter-firm coordination allows the firms to coordinate their internal business activities with a particular coopeting partner, coopetition portfolio coordination helps the firms to synchronize their entire pool of coopetitive relationships comprehensively. "[…] *This routine of communicating with competitors is crucial for the success of our relationships […] to deal with conflicts and avoid time wasters."* (Company secretary, HC). Additionally, the portfolio coordination capability helped the firms to allocate limited resources to coopetitive projects optimally. As one entrepreneur in Kenya explained: *"Our company has learned to take time to do a background check on all competitors we cooperate with before any partnerships are formed […] so that we do not end up in relationships that should not have been there from the get-go."* (Co-founder, APM).

Moreover, results show that a firm's ability to learn and transfer knowledge from its coopeting partner is central to managing the relationship with competitors. For instance, one managing director claimed that his company had been deeply involved in cooperation with competitors because "*there is always something new to learn from a competitor, […]TTHC director learned and picked key information from a competitor's director […] we are now bigger than a fifteen-year-old business, after implementing the strategies learned."* (Director, TTHC). Therefore, it can be inferred that learning abilities, which we name as coopetition learning processes, can help coopetition partners identify opportunities for joint action (Schilke & Goerzen, 2010) and proactively adapt their coopetitive activities accordingly.

A firm's ability to understand the environment and identify new valuable coopetition opportunities is key to forging relationships with competitors. For example, a participant mentioned that his firm was not hesitant in making cooperative proposals to competing firms that possess the resources his firm needs: "*We cooperate with our competitors because of the resource constraints that we face. We have no choice but to approach and enter into agreements with our competitors who have the resources."* (Chief executive officer, MC1). Furthermore, evidence emerges from the empirical data that flexibility and a willingness to modify coopetitive relationships according to new environmental contingencies enable firms to succeed in coopetitive relationships. "*Key success factors for partnerships include flexibility, information sharing, and holding meetings to review the relationship. […] We are flexible in that we can easily change the agreements to our advantage."* (Coordinator, HEI). Thus, coopetition transformation capability is another important aspect of a firm's overall capability to manage coopetition relationships.

Based on these findings and the influential work of Teece (2007) on dynamic capabilities, we reason that these five elements of organizational processes are the fundamental mechanisms by which SMEs manage coopetitive relationships. For example, through coopetition coordination, SMEs develop the capability to harmonize and govern coopetitive activities with multiple rival partners. In addition, a firm's ability to learn and transfer knowledge from its coopeting partners plays a key role in the success of coopetition relationships. Accordingly, we suggest that coopetition learning is a relevant dimension of coopetition capability. Furthermore, our data indicate that a firm's ability to understand the environment and identify new coopetition opportunities is key to successful coopetition. Finally, we established that flexibility and willingness to modify coopetitive relationships according to new environmental conditions enabled the SMEs to cooperate with the right competitors at the right time and succeed in coopetitive relationships, signaling the coopetition transformation dimension of coopetition capability.

From our empirical data, we can conclude that the conceptual domain of coopetition capability entails elements of inter-firm coopetition coordination, coopetition portfolio coordination, coopetition learning, coopetition proactiveness, and coopetition transformation. These five routines enable SMEs to effectively and efficiently manage their coopetitive relationships. In the following section, we rely on the representative quotations in Table 2 to elaborate on our theoretical framework and propositions.

5.2. How competence in managing coopetition arrangements drives coopetition success

Findings from our empirical data indicate that a more robust competence in managing cooperation with competitors, and coopetition capability, resulted in successful coopetition outcomes, which we name coopetition success. As one participant indicated: "*…[our] company is very open to competitors to come and learn from us and* vice versa*, which is the reason these relationships have been successful over the last eight years."* (Chief executive officer, APM). Therefore, we propose that a strong competence in managing coopetition arrangements is a prerequisite for coopetition success. Considering the challenges associated with cooperating with competitors highlighted in the literature and revealed in this study, we view coopetition capability as a relationship management competence enabling a firm to execute coopetitive tasks efficiently and effectively and exploit opportunities coopetition creates for its benefit. Consequently, we propose that:

Proposition 1. *A firm with a stronger competence in managing coopetition arrangements is likely to experience a successful relationship with competitors.*

5.3. How regulatory requirements drive a firm's coopetition competence

The SME managers interviewed generally indicated that the need to satisfy the government's requirement for local content pushed them to cooperate with competitors, especially foreign competitors. One of the managers interviewed stated that the: *"Government's requirement for local content is a good boost as we tend to have a lot of foreign companies wanting to partner with us."* (Accounts manager, TEC). Another manager also indicated that: "*cooperation with competitors is the way of the future for this industry, especially in this sector where companies are being forced by law to work together."* (Director, CEC). We, therefore, suggest that regulatory demand compels firms to develop coopetition capability. Although most prior coopetition research does not reveal the role of regulatory forces in shaping inter-firm relationships, our findings support Mariani's (2007) study on the concepts of imposed cooperation and induced coopetition. We also draw from institutional theory tenets to propose that regulatory demands may either constrain or support the development of coopetition capability. Therefore, firms in environments that exhibit high regulatory demands for cooperation between competing firms will have high levels of coopetition capability. Thus, we posit that:

Proposition 2. *Greater regulatory requirements on a firm to cooperate with competitors is likely to drive a firm to develop competence in managing coopetition arrangements.*

5.4. How customer demands drive a firm's coopetition competence

Evidence from a large number of case firms demonstrated a rising pressure from customers on firms to create greater market value. This has occurred to the extent that the increasing demand on firms to address customer expectations has forced them to cooperate with competitors in order to meet customer expectations, as the following quotation highlights: *"We sat with our competing partners to discuss and agree on how we were going to work together to deliver the world cup events to our customers. The motivation was to satisfy our customers by giving them uninterrupted world cup broadcast."* (Marketing manager, TC).

Customers may have varied and changing demands that may require an individual SME firm to seek help to effectively and efficiently deliver on its own. However, competing SMEs may see the need to work together to meet the needs of their customers. As one CEO in our data highlighted: *"To a larger extent, customers push us to partner with competitors […] deep customer demands brought about our latest joint venture, where our competitor's customer needed something that our competitor did not have. […] We showed up with the solution, and the customer asked us (the two competitors) to get together and sort it out to deliver a result."* (Chief executive officer, HC). Given these pieces of evidence, we contend that firms operating in a highly demanding customer environment will likely develop the capability to manage coopetition arrangements. Thus, we propose that:

Proposition 3. *A highly demanding customer environment will likely force a firm to develop competence in managing coopetition arrangements.*

5.5. How coopetition learning processes drive a firm's coopetition competence

Previous research suggests that internal organizational processes fostering learning on inter-firm relationships help firms develop greater knowledge on how inter-firm relationships should be managed (e.g., Kale & Singh, 2007; Sluyts et al., 2011). In integrating this extant body of knowledge with our findings from the empirical data, we reason that a firm's proclivity to learn from its past experiences with coopetitive arrangements will likely drive its ability to manage its relationships with competitors. For example, one major accounts manager at a high-technology company revealed: "*Information is shared during the alliance meetings. These meetings are tight and usually last for five full days. At GMC Technologies, we also have meetings where we analyze the alliance and see how we benefit as a company. The company representatives update us in our meetings […] Communication is done within the firm to allow other key personnel to know the agreements. In short, information is shared at the contract's inception, especially with those concerned."* (Major accounts manager, GMC).

In line with the organizational learning literature (e.g., Zollo & Winter, 2002; Kale & Singh, 2007; Sluyts et al., 2011), we identified four learning processes that the case study firms use to cooperate with their competitor partners, including articulating on cooperation with competitors, documenting cooperative activities with competitors, sharing information on cooperation with competitors, and adopting routines that foster cooperation with competitors. Findings from the empirical data suggest that, through articulating the need for cooperation with competitors, managers can externalize, through the spoken or written word, their personal experiences and knowledge on cooperation with competitors (Zollo & Singh, 2004). "*[…] Communication is done within the firm to allow other key personnel to know of the agreements. In short, there is information sharing at the contract's inception, especially with those concerned."* (Major accounts manager, GMC).

It was revealed in our data that the processes of documenting day-to-day coopetition activities provided the managers not only with a deep understanding of managing coopetitive related tasks but also a guide to decision making and actions relating to how the firm engages with competitors (Kale & Singh, 2007). The documentation entailed summaries of meetings with competitor representatives. In these areas, the competing partners cooperated (e.g., product design, delivery) with key contact personnel and agreed on practices and timelines, among others. These activities provided the partners with common ground and delineated what each partner was required to do. "*Our guidelines and manuals help us deal with competitors […]. For example, only the external communications officer can communicate with our partners."* (Contracts manager, MC2).

In addition, evidence from the case firms (e.g., Major accounts manager, GMC's quotation above) showed that the firms could increase their coopetition know-how by sharing key information on their experiences and knowledge on cooperation with competitors. Furthermore, evidence emerged to demonstrate that the case firms absorbed coopetition knowledge and best practices in their operational routines by investing in an internalization process, entailing processes of training and mentorship programs on effective management coopetitive tasks. *"The company conducts in-house workshops where those in charge disseminate information on how to deal with our partners. […] there is a lot of support from the seniors on what to do and what not in these partnerships,"* (Head of department, R&D).

Based on these findings, we suggest that a coopetition learning process relating to deliberate efforts to articulate, document, share, and adopt coopetition know-how within a firm helps drive a firm's coopetition capability. We reason that, through these processes, a firm can learn, accumulate, and leverage inter-firm relationship management know-how and best practices (Kale & Singh, 2007). These not only allow the firm to understand its current alliance situations but also permit it to predict future changes in the relationship. As a manager from HEI stated: *"We can learn from our competitors and through our internal firm meetings; we discuss and share knowledge on how to relate with our competitors. This allows us to move together as a company."* Consequently, we propose that,

Proposition 4. *Firms with formalized internal learning processes on cooperating with competitors are likely to have stronger coopetition management competence.*

6. Discussion

6.1. Contribution to theory

Considering that cooperation between competitors is viewed as both beneficial and costly to a firm, it is worthwhile to explore the potential role of coopetition capability in inter-firm relationships. Accordingly, the underlying motivation of this study was to discover and explain the conceptual domain of coopetition capability, how it is developed in SMEs, and how it drives firm success outcomes.

Drawing on the resource-based and dynamic capability theories, this study contributes in several ways to the inter-firm relationship in general and coopetition in particular. First, the study enhances the inter-firm relationship literature by providing clarity on the conceptual domains of coopetition capability. Findings from the study highlight the relevance of coopetition capability to SMEs in the context of developing economies. While developing economies are characterized mainly by collectivistic cultures and are, thus, expected to have smooth inter-firm relationships (Ryu et al., 2011; Zacharia et al., 2019), the study finds that SMEs face complexities and uncertainties in their cooperative relationships with competitors as do their counterparts in developed economies. We show that coopetition capability allows SMEs to develop and effectively manage coopetitive relationships with the right partners to create greater market value. In line with the dynamic capability view and consistent with Schilke and Goerzen's (2010) conceptualization of alliance management capability, we demonstrate that coopetition capability is a dynamic capability comprising inter-firm coopetition coordination, coopetition portfolio coordination, coopetition learning, coopetition proactiveness, and coopetition transformation. These five organizational routines enable firms to manage their coopetition arrangements effectively and efficiently, leading to successful outcomes.

Specifically, coordination allows a firm to implement formal procedures, rules, and policies to guide the governance of its relationship with competitors (Goerzen & Beamish, 2005). Our study also reveals that a firm's learning ability can determine the extent to which it effectively manages its relationship with competitors. This ability helps the cooperating rivals identify opportunities for joint action and proactively adapt their coopetitive activities (Schilke & Goerzen, 2010). In addition, a firm that is proactive in monitoring its environment and in gathering information on prospective partners is more likely to identify, evaluate, and engage in coopetitive relationships with the suitable market rival at the right time and for the right reasons, which may translate into coopetition success (Leischnig et al., 2014; Schilke & Goerzen, 2010). Furthermore, flexibility and willingness to modify coopetitive relationships according to new environmental conditions enable firms to effectively manage coopetitive arrangements. This is important considering the uncertainty of the business environment in most developing economies. Our study sets the scene for future research to examine the interaction of the five dimensions and their organizational success outcomes.

Moreover, we find that firms with greater coopetition capability can identify, engage, and manage coopetition engagements in a way that benefits them but also makes them more capable of restructuring and terminating unsuccessful relationships. Given the challenges and risks associated with cooperating with competitors, a firm with high levels of coopetition capability can better manage its coopetition and exploit inter-firm relationships in a way that helps reinforce its market position (Schilke & Goerzen, 2010). Furthermore, coopetition capability is likely to improve SMEs' performance because SMEs involved in coopetition arrangements can reap a variety of benefits, including cost and risk sharing, access to coopeting partners' skills, knowledge, resources, and capabilities, and opportunities to enter protected markets, which can be challenging in developing economies (Chandra et al., 2020; Zulu-Chisanga et al., 2021).

Our argument supports the findings of Gnyawali and Park (2011) that Samsung's internal capability to manage inter-firm relationships allowed it to benefit more from its alliance with Sony, a rival high-technology firm. The key point to note is that coopetition capability focuses on creating superior financial value based on risk, cost, and resource sharing. Thus, while coopetition may be risky in terms of potential loss of trade secrets, benefits generated from greater access to resources, skills, and expanded market opportunities due to coopetition arrangements may help boost a firm's performance. Similarly, Raza-Ullah et al. (2019) suggest that developing a coopetition capability can help firms enhance the success of their inter-firm relationship because it minimizes the negative performance effect of paradoxical tension characterized by coopetitive relationships.

Furthermore, this research draws on resource-based theory in uncovering knowledge on the drivers of the development of coopetition capability. Most of the extant work on the drivers of dynamic capabilities largely conceptualizes (e.g., Teece, 2007) but does not empirically examine the drivers and relevance of resources in the development of dynamic capabilities (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003). However, this study shows how external market environment forces and internal firm practices may trigger the development of this capability in SMEs. More specifically, our results reveal how regulatory requirements, customer demands, and coopetition learning processes can be potential drivers of coopetition capability. Although the bulk of prior coopetition research does not reveal the roles that regulatory forces and customer-related pressures play in shaping the benefits that firms derive from inter-firm relationships, our findings provide preliminary support for Mariani's (2007) notion of imposed cooperation and induced coopetition, which highlight the potential for external environment forces to trigger the need for cooperation between competing firms. Additionally, our study uncovers a link between formalized organizational learning processes and capability development, about which past research is less clear. The study reveals that the formalized organizational learning process on how to cooperate with competitors is a possible factor driving a firm to develop coopetition capability.

6.2. *Managerial implications*

From a managerial perspective, this study highlights the relevance of the coopetitive relationship as a major success factor. While the traditional notion of competition has taken root in more developed economies (such as North America and Western Europe) and is perceived positively and even legally protected and encouraged, it is important to recognize that its manifestation in developing economies (particularly those in SSA) comes with some nuances. As we show in this study, while competition may manifest itself in the relationship between firms, it is often not so explicit. For example, it is normal for a manager to perceive other firms not as rivals in an industry (even though a firm next door may be selling identical merchandise) but rather as members of a community of businesses. This unique manifestation of an intersection between competition and cooperation, where rival firms see each other as "neighbors" or "friends" resonates with traditional African Ubuntu, which literally means "I am because we are" (Kamoche & Wood, 2023), and reflects communal living practices in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In the sub-Saharan African context, therefore, managers need to have an appreciation of the notion that "competition" is perceived negatively, and it is even inappropriate to acknowledge rivals in the "community" as competitors. Thus, business success is very much a function of the willingness and ability of firms to develop internal routines and processes that allow managers and personnel to cooperate with competitors as members of a "community".

In addition, managers in developing economies should encourage coopetition learning, focusing on activities that inspire articulation, codification, sharing, and internalizing of coopetition know-how in their firms if they are to optimize the benefit of coopetitive relationships. All four aspects of the coopetition learning process should increase managers' coopetition management knowledge and, thus, develop an increased coopetition capability that will allow them to succeed in coopetitive relationships as they move toward eventual improvement in firm performance.

6.3. *Limitations and future research*

Our proposed framework of the drivers and outcomes of coopetition capability (Fig. 1 and Appendix 1) should provide a strong foundation for further research on this topic. Although the propositions are theoretically sound and empirically anchored in multiple empirical data sources, they are exploratory and untested. A large-scale survey of SMEs would allow the proposed framework to be tested. Most of the constructs contained within the model are well established in the literature, apart from coopetition capability and coopetition performance. However, studies on alliance management capability and success (e.g., Schilke & Goerzen, 2010; Kale & Singh, 2007) could serve as a basis for such a measure development exercise.

7. Conclusion

The practice of coopetition is now increasingly being used by firms around the world, and it seems that this applies to SMEs in developing contexts. The findings of this study suggest that coopetitive capability is manifested in SMEs' ability to proactively develop, coordinate, and learn from portfolios of inter-firm relationships with competitors. Furthermore, the study finds that interactivities between regulatory requirements, customer demands, and firm-specific learning processes are major triggers of the propensity of SMEs to develop and benefit from coopetition capability. There is also evidence to suggest that regulatory requirements, customer demands, and coopetition learning processes can influence decisions and practices in relation to the development of coopetition capability. Overall, it is becoming clear that the role of coopetition is applicable to SMEs in developing economies and is actively pursued by their managers as a way to minimize vulnerabilities to environmental shocks, deal with sudden changes in regulations, face disruptions from new technologies, address limitations in resources, and effectively tackle shifting customer needs and expectations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stella Zulu-Chisanga: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Pejvak Oghazi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration. **Magnus Hultman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Constantinos N. Leonidou:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Nathaniel Boso:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix 1:. Score table on dimensions, drivers, and outcomes of coopetition capability

No.	Firm	Dimensions of Coopetition					Drivers and outcomes of coopetition capability			
		ICC*	CPC*	CL*	CP*	CT*	CCRP*	RRQ*	CD*	PLC*
1.	Television Company (TC)	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	
2.	Civil and Building Contracting Company (CBCC)	✓		✓				✓		✓
3.	Telecom Company (TEC)	✓					✓	✓		✓
4.	Construction Company (CC)	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
5.	Higher Education Institution (HEI)	✓	✓				✓	✓		✓
6.	Medical Centre (MC)	✓	✓	✓				✓		
7.	Air Travel Company (ATC)	✓						✓	✓	
8.	Mining and Construction (M&C)		✓		✓		✓			
9.	Surgery (SU)	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
10.	Tour Operator (TO)						✓		✓	✓
11.	Mining Company 1 (MC1)				✓		✓			✓
12.	Research & Development (R&D)	✓		✓			✓	✓		
13.	Mining Company (MC2)	✓				✓	✓		✓	
14.	Electrical Equipment Manufacturing Company (EEMC)	✓					✓		✓	
15.	Radio Station (RS)	✓		✓				✓		
16.	Insurance Brokerage Company (IBC)	✓					✓	✓		✓
17.	Healthcare Consultancy (HC)						✓	✓		
18.	Public Relations Consultancy (PRC)	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
19.	Real Estate Company (REC)	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
20.	Auto Parts Manufacturer (APM)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
21.	Internet Service Provider (ISP)			✓			✓		✓	✓
22.	Branding and Design (B&D)		✓				✓		✓	
23.	Civil Engineering Company (CEC)	✓		✓			✓	✓		✓
24.	Tours and Travel/Car Hiring Company (TTHC)		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
25.	Airline Company (AC)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

* ICC = Inter firm coopetition coordination, CPC = Coopetition portfolio coordination, CL = Coopetition learning, CP = Coopetition proactiveness, CT = Coopetition transformation, CCRP = Coopetition capability and relationship performance, RRQ = Regulatory requirements, CD = Customer demands, PLC = Processes of learning to cooperate with competitors.

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