

CAN COOPETITION BE SOURCE OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE FOR STRATEGIC NETWORKS?

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Abstract

Contributions on competitive strategy and advantage have been long concentrated on the single firm. In Europe small and medium enterprises still prevail, business districts are widespread and rivals are called to cooperate, in order to face the global context. Inter-firm collaboration seems to be the main path to survive and compete. Literature has more concentrated on the reasons for success of strategic alliances and networks even if many of them fail or do not take off. In the light of relational view and the absorptive capacity approach, the paper tries to verify whether coopetition, can be, through the relations that generates, source of competitive advantage or rather of disadvantage. Theoretical hints are tested empirically on a sample of firms in Italy operating in tourism industry.***

Keywords: Coopetition, Strategic Networks, Inter-Firm Collaboration

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1 From the firm to the network through strategic alliances: the relational perspective

If within the industrial-economic literature, strategic alliances have been read at first as a form of control of market logics, by more or less underhanded collusion between competitors, it is now generally accepted that alliances can be seen as a strategic alternative way to gain competitive advantage. Many streams of research within economic and managerial literature have studied inter-firm collaboration and alliances as a prominent phenomenon, from different theoretical perspectives. Large space inter-firm collaboration has gained in academic debate, as shown by special issues published in major journals⁸ and many articles concentrated on topics as formation process, sustained competitive advantage and value creation process, value appropriation, conflict potential, trust vs opportunism problems in alliances and strategic networks.

Analysing the logic of alliance formation, strategic alliances have been interpreted as a mechanism to deal with uncertainty and a way to access specific resources (Arino and Garcia-Canal, 2012). As regards external uncertainty, which refers to the complexity of the environment, flexibility is relevant, and, as real options theory explains,

alliances are a way to maintain flexibility (Kogut, 1991). Behavioural uncertainty, instead, is connected to the risk of opportunism in transactions. Transaction cost logic has been applied to alliances formation, through a governance form's choice explanation. Opportunism in partners' behaviour thus becomes a prominent question. A potential of conflict is inherent in relationships (Fey, Beamish, 1999). When there is a high risk of opportunistic behaviour in a transaction related to highly specific assets, an alliance, even better if in a form of a joint venture, reduces this risk, through a mechanism of mutual hostage positions by partners (Hennart, 1988). Alliance in this approach is a way to control opportunism in transactions. Some authors introduce a learning race perspective (Hamel, Doz, Prahalad, 1989; Hamel, 1991). As tension between cooperation and competition is inherent in strategic alliances, each partner is involved in a race to outcompete the other one in acquiring his knowledge and appropriating the results of cooperation.

Through a different perspective, some scholars (Chan et al., 1997; Anand, Khanna, 2000) underline the benefits of cooperation towards economic value creation for single enterprises. Resource-based theory stresses the opportunity for a partner through an alliance to access resources valuable, rare and costly to imitate or to develop internally, in order to get a sustainable competitive advantage (Das, Teng, 2000). The rationale for alliances is the value-creation potential of firm resources that are pooled together and some resource characteristics (imperfect mobility,

⁸ We refer to Organization Science special Issues n.9 on *Managing Partnership and Strategic Alliances* (1998) and SMJ n.21 on *Strategic Networks* (2000)

imitability, substitutability) promise accentuated value-creation, and thus facilitate alliance formation (Das, Teng, 2000). Firms join complementary resources and capabilities to create value, gaining access to external knowledge (Arora, Gambardella, 2000; Hess, Rothaermel, 2011). Some studies point out that firms learn from prior alliance experience. Some argue that alliance exploitation experience has positive effects on R&D project performance, while these effects are not verified for exploration experience (Hoang, Rothaermel, 2010). Partner's fit is important for collaboration success (Buckley, Casson, 1988), as trust, commitment, communication (Das, Teng, 1998) and fairness in alliance formation (Arino, Ring, 2010).

Relational view offers a different way to explain the learning process inside an alliance (Gulati, 1998; Dyer, Singh 1998; Kale, Singh, 2007)⁹. Through this perspective enterprise's critical resources can extend well beyond its specific boundaries and can be shared with partners (Dyer and Singh, 1998). Relational view goes beyond traditional dyadic alliance and analyses relations in strategic networks (Gulati, 1998)¹⁰. Every single firm is embedded in a relational network able to influence its behaviour¹¹.

The relation between *social networks* and alliances can be analysed from an endogenous point of view and from an external one. The so-called endogenous view underlines the influence the social networks produce on alliances, while the external view points out the structure of the social networks that can be modified by the new relations developed by means of alliances (Gulati, 1998).

Two major questions addressed by relational view are: how can a firm develop specific relational (dynamic) capabilities? Which kind of governance mechanisms would favour value creation (relational rents) in alliance and networks? (Della Corte, Sciarelli, 2011).

A theory of relational dynamic capabilities comes from *knowledge-based view of the firm* (Collis, 1996; Grant, 1996a) and dynamic capabilities studies (Teece, Pisano, Shuen, 1997; Zollo, Winter, 2002; Helfat, 2007). A four-phases knowledge management

process (Kale and Singh, 2007) describes how single firms can develop knowledge through alliances. *Articulation of alliance know-how* is the first phase, in which firms tend to relate past experience to future ones in order to improve the knowledge base according to their needs for learning processes (Zollo and Winter, 2002). The second phase is the codification of tacit knowledge pertaining to an alliance (*codification of alliance know-how*), aimed to facilitate transfer of knowledge (Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nonaka, 1994), and also to foster a process able to create further knowledge (Zollo and Winter, 2002). In the third phase (*sharing of alliance know-how*) they create structures facilitating the spreading of knowledge through the interaction between actors within the organization (Seely, Brown and Duguid, 1991; March, Sproull and Tamuz, 1991). In the last phase (*internalization of alliance know-how*) each single manager improves knowledge base on alliances' management and, at the same time, their *absorptive capacity*.

Social networks studies offer a useful point of view to investigate how firms involved in an alliance can be influenced in their actions from being part of a social relationship. The way the information flows within social networks is very important (Stinchcombe, 1990). There are two forms of embeddedness that can favour transfer of information (Granovetter, 1992). *Relational embeddedness* is the ability of two partners to have access to the same quantity of information, reducing uncertainty and promoting trust; *structural embeddedness* depends on the global capacity of the network's structure to facilitate the flow of information, and allows each actor of the network to gain an advantage depending on his "status" within it (Podolny, 1993, 1994). The location of firms in inter-firm networks (degree of centrality) is a relevant factor even for competition analysis (Gulati, Nohria, Zaheer, 2000). Embeddedness and centrality play a relevant effect on knowledge creation process and on building relational dynamic capabilities. Relational View and social network studies offer an effective analytical framework for the comprehension of rents and competitive advantages in strategic alliances.

Firms that belong to the same network participate to a slow propagation of a *knowledge-based* climate of trust (Shapiro, Sheppard and Cheraskin, 1992), which reduces the threats of opportunism (Barney and Hansen, 1994).

There is a kind of "chain reaction" mechanisms that may allow a firm to exploit the relational network of the alliance partner, to create new links as well as to develop new alliances. Firms usually select a partner within their relational network.

Nevertheless, a key question is about appropriation of value created inside an alliance (Khanna, Gulati, Nohria, 1998) and the division of value among partners (Adegbesan, Higgins, 2011). Relational View approach analyses the distribution of

⁹ Gulati (1998: 293) defines alliances as "voluntary arrangements between firms involving exchange, sharing, or codevelopment of products, technologies, or services."

¹⁰ Strategic networks of firms create a "system of value co-creation within constellations of integrated resources" (Katz and Shapiro, 1994; Jones, Hesterly and Borgatti, 1997; Rowley, 1997; Van-der Krogt, 2006; Spohrer, 2007).

¹¹ A relational network is defined as "a set of nodes (e.g., persons, organizations) linked by a set of social relationships (e.g., friendship, transfer of funds, overlapping membership) of a specified type" (Laumann, Galaskiewicz and Marsden, 1978: 458). The first studies pertaining the effects of social networks focused themselves on structural factors, such as *inequality, embedding, contagion, and contingency* (Burt et al., 1994).

benefits and of relational rents amongst the participants in the alliance or in the network. A partner may take the value created by the alliance, when he is able to convince other partners that he has valuable, rare and inimitable resources and that they would be unable to get those strategic resources from the market or from other partners (Dyer, Singh and Kale, 2008). However, another partner can achieve his capacity to acquire those skills from the one who had them, and autonomously replicate that. There is therefore a high risk of transferring key knowledge through an alliance. On the other side, the firm that has the widest network of relationships and alliances, and has a central position in the network, can exploit informative benefits and exert control over relationships (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

As concerns governance mechanisms, social network theory (Burt, 1982; Granovetter, 1985) offers a different perspective from transaction cost analysis. The network with its structure of relationships is the basis for the creation of a deterrence-based trust (Kreps, 1990; Raub and Weesie, 1990; Shapiro et al., 1992; Burt and Knez, 1995). Unfair behaviour, in a network, may generate consequences on firm's reputation. The fear of this bad reputation leads partners to fair behaviour, even without equity forms of agreements (like JV). While transaction cost economics and property rights scholars believe in formal contract-based governance, others argue that trust among partners can improve interorganizational relationships efficiencies (Connelly, Miller, Devers, 2012). Some studies focus on the question of governance modes and interdependence (Aggarwal, Siggelkow, Singh, 2011). Governance mechanisms become necessary in order to facilitate rent creation through the uniqueness of the resource combination used in the alliance, more than in favouring transaction cost minimisation (Dyer and Singh, 1998: 662)¹².

2 The role of competition in inter-firm collaboration: a theoretical model

2.1. Purposes and theoretical background

This paper, that takes into account research on Resource-based theory in latest years (RBT – Rumelt, 1984; Dierickx, Cool, 1989; Wernfelt, 1984; Barney, 1986; 1991; 2002; Della Corte Sciarelli, 1999; etc.), is the result of a wide research project conducted on the themes of strategic networks, co-competition and strategic systems. This attempt, that has also led to the publication of Jay Barney's textbook entitled "Gaining and sustaining competitive advantage" in Italian with the addition of a specific chapter on inter-

firm networking and business systems, has not been a simple application of RBT to European context but, on the contrary, has strengthened some important developments in theory, such as the possibility that a company's success does not depend exclusively on its specific resources and competences, but also on inter-firm, shared resources, capabilities and competences, that can be analyzed at different levels (firms' aggregations/strategic networks that, in some cases, can even become "inter-firms systems"). *More precisely we refer to situations where there are complex sets of relations among firms and between them and the network itself which, if characterized by continuous relations, physical or virtual proximity and implying eventual involvement of local resources, can be defined as "systems"* (Della Corte, 2009, p. 414).

In order to understand a firm's competitiveness, it is sometimes important to analyze its interactions with other firms, both big and small, with public organizations, with other local or far entities, in the logic of a "wide, open strategic system". The unit of analysis is so the entire strategic system, such as a tourism destination, in order to verify whether co-competition mechanisms (Nalebuff, Brabderburger, 1996, Dagnino, Padula, 2002), governed through a set of relations labelled as destination management processes in tourism industry, can even influence its competitiveness.

The objective is to study the roots of these entities' competitiveness and, more precisely, to verify if and when some competitors can and do decide to cooperate. In this direction, co-competitive relations are examined with reference to a theoretical framework based on Resource-based theory and its developments and, in particular:

- *relational view* (Gulati, 1998; Dyer and Singh, 1998; Kale and Singh, 1999, 2007; Kale, Dyer and Singh, 2002), more focused on the social content of the relationship between the firm and its external environment; these regard both inter-firms relationships and Institutional relations (tourism's policies aimed at favouring networking);

- *the absorptive capacity model*, linked to the concept of embeddedness (cultural - Granovetter, 1983 - and social - Boisot, 1986), that helps analyzing the process of inter-firm relations in knowledge creation, putting in evidence the continuous interchange with external environment which favours firm's embeddedness. Institutionalized social norms and the values acquired by strategic actors can in fact even determine the emergence of inter-firm collaborations (Boisot, 1986, de Rond, 2003). These relationships can generate knowledge and competences that are *relational rents* (Dyer and Singh, 1998), able to generate either temporary or sustainable competitive advantage.

As underlined in the previous paragraph, according to Relational View, alliances and networks can create advantages in term of: *relational*

¹² The authors point out that the resources used in the alliance must be worthy, their combination being both rare and hard to imitate, and the alliance must be constructed in order to exploit their potential.

embeddedness, i.e. the ability of two actors sharing a relation to access the same hoard of information, to lessen uncertainty and to promote trust (reliability) between them; *structural embeddedness* that is the global capacity of the network's configuration to facilitate information flows, available for participants to the network.

These factors give a more effective interpretative framework in the study and in the comprehension of rents and competitive advantages in inter-firm collaboration (strategic alliances, networks).

Relational rents can refer both to common (*common benefits*) and specific (*private benefits*) areas. According to Dyer, Singh and Kale (2008), in the first case, a partner's negotiation power may create value for him when he succeeds in convincing other partners that he is the only one to own valuable, rare and inimitable (VRIO) resources which the others would be unable to get from market or from other partners. However, in the process of resource replication through reciprocal learning some parties may be able to acquire those VRIO-related skills and competences.

Regarding unilateral factors, i.e. those specific to a single partner in the alliance, Dyer, Singh and Kale (2008) refer to three different views: *Related Resources Theory*, *Structural Holes Theory* and *Resource Development Theory*. The partner that holds a *scope of resources and activities* resulting more related and in tune with those important to the alliance is endowed of the greatest *relative absorptive capacity* (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) within the alliance and has particularly effective inter-organisational routines in order to secure the effective transfer of resources and knowledge is able to generate bigger *relational rents*.

This perspective, however, tries to examine inter-firm relations within a "positive" approach that has its roots in RBT (firm or, in this case, the network or system's "creator of positive" rather than "avoider of negative" - Conner, 1991). On the other hand, it seems to take into account the problem of opportunistic behaviours both in the management of the relation (RV) and in the process of learning and absorptive capacity (in terms of transfer of strategic knowledge, skills and competencies). It seems that both theories imply as their main assumption that parties do have to behave correctly in order to get to the benefits they single out from collaboration.

With reference to collaboration, our aim is to investigate consolidated and systematic forms of collaboration that go far beyond strategic alliances but are characterized by continuity and consolidated organizational forms (both explicit and implicit).

Strategic systems are made of a complex set of relationships of different nature and between different parties, both cooperative and competitive.

The competitive soul has so necessarily to be considered. In our study, we in fact try to apply

coopetition logic not just at a business level but rather at a strategic system's level.

In our opinion, the challenge is to verify whether coopetition itself can really be strategic for a network-system and therefore be source of competitive advantage, trying to combine the resource-based perspective through relational view, the absorptive capacity model and the competition perspective.

This effort however requires a preliminary specification of the difference between competition and opportunistic behaviours. More specifically, we try to verify whether it's more appropriate to consider competition rather than opportunistic behaviour in a wider sense, thus even considering the possibility that more competitive systems can generate higher performance in inter-firm collaboration.

Competition has been traditionally analyzed in the fields of industrial organization, both in terms of five forces analysis (Porter, 1980, 1981) and of dynamic competition (Grimm, Smith, 2008).

The five forces analysis is considered as a sort of static analysis of the competitive situation at a specific time, even if it broadens the mind set of competition, including substitutes and menace of new entries, contractual power both of clients and of suppliers that require also perspective considerations and evaluations. It conducts to a broader view of market and competition, even if with some relevant limitations. First, it's based on a product-based view of competition and positioning. Secondly, it refers to competition from a market perspective. Using RBT lenses, competition is based not on products but rather on resources: competitive firms have functionally similar resources. These means that the five forces themselves can differ from firm to firm and be wider (especially in terms of potential entrants) or more narrow considering resources' value, scarcity (Peteraf, Bergen, 2003) and imitability.

Dynamic competition mainly focuses on firms' actions and reactions, that is on dyadic relationships. In particular, it concentrates on the attributes that define firms' competitive behaviours and their influence on competitors' reactions. In other words, it tries to examine competitiveness within markets through the action-reaction-reaction and so on process. Action is considered to be a specific competitive move a firm makes to improve or defend its competitive position. This move, however, generates competitors' reactions, tending to respond or even outcome the firm's actions (Grimm, Smith, 1997). This is the so called Red Queen context, in which a firms' performance depends on its matching or overcoming its rivals' actions (Derfus et al, 2008). It's a sort of continuous process that increases firms' tendency towards competitiveness (Barnett, McKendrick, 2004), with influence even on economic development (Baumal, 2004). Some scholars (Derfus et al, 2008) in particular concentrate on the dyadic relationship, where the advantage for one firm can't but happen at the expense of the other (zero-sum

game). According to this approach, in competitive contexts there is a process of searching, acting and consequent learning. Effects depend on the action-reaction process intensity as well as on the time of response of competitors to focal firm's actions.

In competitive analysis, *market commonalities* as well as *resource similarities* have to be taken into account: the first regard the number of markets where actors compete as well as the degree of importance of each market for each competitor (Hitt et al, p. 141); the idea is that multimarket competition somehow reduces competitive rivalry. Resource similarity refers to the type and amount of both tangible and intangible resources among competitors: the more similar they are the more intense is competition. These aspects influence, on their turn, companies' behaviours' drivers, in terms of awareness (recognition of the mutual dependency bound to market commonality and resource similarity), motivation (the incentive to attack or respond according to the foresees gains and losses) and their own ability (resources and degree of flexibility).

We however do agree with the framework that takes into account both market-based and resource-based competition (Peteraf, Bergen, 2003), according to which in order to identify a firm's competitors, it's important to consider market needs correspondence, that refers to the same served customer needs and resource substitution served functions. More specifically, resource-based competition in markets that are defined in terms of customers' needs considers as competitive firms that have resources that are functionally equivalent: it's not a question of resources' type but rather of their functionality that comes out and that makes them substitutes of each other.

The very important aspect to underline that regards our view of competition is its link with strategic rather than tactical issues and, therefore, in terms of innovation capacity that dates back to Schumpeter (1942; 1976), with specific reference to the process of "creative destruction" bound to innovative actions carried out by a firm to gain a competitive advantage on its own market, successively eroded (or at least with the attempt of eroding it) by other firms. Even specific contributions on cooperation define competition as "the use of received knowledge that may have a negative reverse-impact" on the sending party (Levy, et al, 2001, p. 642), referring to the fact that the receiver's use of knowledge can reduce its value for the sender, thus weakening the original owner.

In synthesis, competition can be viewed as a complex process where firm's strategy interacts with other actors, more or less involved, in a dynamic process of continuous innovation. The more hypercompetitive is the context, the more intense are these factors. Thus our view takes into account both static and dynamic competition: their revision through RBT lenses, however, allows acquiring a dynamic

view since potentially competitive resources have to be analyzed in advance. It's therefore a different dynamic vision, which, besides, takes into account not just dyadic relations but rather multi-players relations.

However, in competitive contexts some further factors can come out and precisely the fact that a firm can have some specific relations with actors that are outside the competitive context but whose relations with can reinforce its position in its market; or even some inter-firm collaborations can be started among competitors, thus reducing threats and influencing future behaviours.

Traditionally, *coopetition* has been used as a catch-phrase to explain the situation that is created when an enterprise makes some competitive actions that grant some benefits to some other players in the same industries (Brandenburg and Nalebuff, 1996); under a different interpretation, the term is referred to the situation when a firm competes with some firms while cooperating with others, different from the first (Lado, Boyd and Hanlon, 1997); a last point of view on *coopetition* is that of a firm that has some cooperation relationships with firms that are, at the same time, competitors in some other market (Dowling, Roering, Carlin and Wisnieski, 1996). Some of the most relevant contributions on the topic are summerized in table 1.

Particularly, a vision of the *coopetition* as an aspect of the relationship is the fundament of the *coopetition's* definition that identifies it as the situation in which two or more firms interact on the basis of *partially overlapped interests* and it is represented on a continuous segment on the basis of the relative weight given to the competitive component and to that of cooperation (Lado et al, 1997; Padula e Dagnino, 2005: 5).

The competition aspect in the firm's actions is interpreted following the theories of the *competitive paradigm*; theories that can be divided into those that ask the firm to modify or follow the market structure (Porter, 1980, 1985) and those that address the firm towards the development of capabilities that are difficult to imitate by *competitors* (Barney, 1991). Following this paradigm, the firm, in order to gain a profit, must subtract it from other players in the market; in this way, the structure of the market is a homeomorphism of a *zero-sum game*.

At the same time, cooperation components, partially elaborated as an answer to the previous paradigm, preview that the market structure could be viewed as a *positive-sum game*. This interpretation set the concept of *cooperation advantage* against that of *competitive advantage* of the previous paradigm. The *cooperative advantage* comes out of a net of strategic interdependence among firms with overlapping interests (Contractor e Lorange, 1988) and it has been initially developed as a way to explain vertical interdependences rents (Håkansson & Ostberg, 1976).

Table 1. Definitions of coopetition

Author(s)	Year	Contribution on Coopetition
Noorda	1992	You have to compete and cooperate at the same time.
Edgell and Haenisch	1995	[Coopetition] is the need of <i>cooperation</i> among tourism destinations in order to better market the tourism product effectively and meet the <i>competition</i> at the regional or global level.
Bradenburg and Nalebuff	1996	Co-opetition is a new way of thinking about business. Some people see business entirely as competition. They think doing business is waging war and assume they can't win unless somebody else loses. Other people see business entirely as co-operation-teams and partnerships. But business is both co-operation and competition.
Bengtsson and Kock	2000	The dyadic and paradoxical relationship that emerges when two firms cooperate in some activities, such as in a strategic alliance, and at the same time compete with each other in other activities.
Dagnino and Padula	2002	[Coopetition is] a system of actors whose interaction is based on partial goal and interest congruence.
Laine	2002	When competitors cooperate there is a continuous tension between competition and cooperation [...]. In practice this means that two firms can cooperate within for example purchasing and service, simultaneously as they compete within manufacturing and marketing... These firms are not solely competitors or rivals in a traditional sense, but they are also partners who cooperate.
Tsai	2002	Simultaneous(ly) cooperative and competitive behavior.
Eikerbakk and Olsen	2005	Simultaneous cooperation and competition.
Global Diversity Wikipedia Institute	2006	A constructive tension where both competition and cooperation between agents are pursued, contributing to their mutual benefit. Coherent behavior within a system arises from the interplay of competition and cooperation among the agents.
Padula and Dagnino	2007	[Coopetition is] the intrusion of competition in a cooperative game structure. [It] provides a more realistic view of the unfolding cooperative relationships.
Ngo and Okura	2007	Competition is a zero-sum game; cooperation is a positive sum-game; [Coopetition is] a variable-positive-sum game because it includes both of these characteristics simultaneously.
Yami <i>et al.</i>	2010	Coopetition is a beneficial strategy for managers striving for performance improvements.
Dagnino	2012	Coopetition is a complex system of interacting, co-adapting firms in which the cooping firms are complex subsystems allows us to define the competitive arenas as self-designing and self-organizing entities.

Source: our reworking.

Even the market's interpretation obtained through both paradigms is different, as the *competitive* market is characterized by *instantaneous exchanges* which can lead to opportunism and the related control costs (Williamson, 1978); *collaborative* market asks for a greater care of the long run, that leads the enterprise to factors in the mutual advantages of a reciprocally correct behaviour.

Some interesting contributions (Lado et al, 1997) propose a syncretic model where, according to the intensity of cooperative orientation and competitive orientation, different strategic behaviours come out: collaborative, competitive, monopolistic and syncretic. The latter, in particular, is characterized by both high cooperative and competitive orientations.

Dagnino and Padula (2002) elaborate a topology that classifies the *coopetition's* relationship following the number of participants, dividing them into dyadic

or network relations, and classifying them with the extension of the *value chain* involved part, defining them simple or complex according to the extension of interests within the value chain.

There are relations of *simple network coopetition*, characterized by cooperation between direct competitors that operate on the same fraction of the value chain. A typical example of these types of relations are the R&D consortia in the automotive industry, that let different car makers share the design of new models so to lessen the development costs.

There can also be relations between two firms in the same industry, with a direct relationship between the participants that must be adequately managed in order to avoid the risk of creating some model of *learning race*; this is a situation in which two players in the market succeed in stipulate an alliance, but the

relationship is not built on mutual trust on the counterpart interest in carrying it on.

In this situation both players will try to satisfy their alliance's objectives as faster as possible, in order to put an end to it before the counterpart can do it. In the network system, the *learning races* are rarer since the greater the number of players, the more advantages a given firm can obtain through the relationship.

Other relations, even if still limited to two firms, cover more activities of the value chain. In this case, although there could be some struggle on the sharing of the added value, it is easier that the relative weight of the cooperative component will raise as the menace of direct competition lowers.

Finally, the so called vertical *coopetition* is extended to more than two levels in the value chain.

In strategic networks and systems made of several enterprises, both big and small, the final situation is the more frequent. With reference to this situation, our view of coopetition is that of:

a firm which has some cooperation relationships with firms that are, at the same time, competitors in some other market (Dowling, Roering, Carlin and Wisniewski, 1996) or mainly in the same market.

This takes to the definition of coopetition as a constructive tension among firms or networks/systems that develop interplay of collaborative relationships, being competitors in some markets or mainly in the same markets.

Our analysis, however, does not refer to business performance, as contributions on coopetition usually suggest, but it is developed within strategic management and aims at studying consolidated and continuous networks (Della Corte, 2009b), that we define as strategic systems, as units of analysis. *This implies verifying what determines the system's overall performance and, at the same time, the single firm's strategic idiosyncrasies.*

Besides, while coopetition studies are usually developed with the help of game theory, we'll try to deal the issue in the light of the above underlined theories, developing a theoretical framework useful not only to study and confront existing situations but that can even become a strategic decision support system for firms and their aggregates.

Therefore, the research questions that come out regard why some concurrent firms should cooperate competitively speaking and why this should happen not only in vertical relations but also in horizontal relations, that is in complex relationships. More precisely, we aim at investigating if coopetitive relations can generate competitive advantage.

From these questions our main research hypotheses derive and precisely:

Hp1: Propensity to collaboration helps the creation and development of inter-firm complex systems.

Hp2: Continuous collaboration improves the system's overall performance (considered in a

multidimensional perspective): firms can gain competitiveness when they are "unable or unwilling to cope with the complexity and risks of the environment" (Cravens, Ship & Cravens, 1993), in terms of market opportunities' increase and/or more efficiency in operations.

Hp3: In situations where collaboration and competition are both high, the system's overall performance is higher than situations where collaboration is high but competition is low.

Considering this is a research paper, to test the above mentioned hypotheses, we developed the theoretical framework and tested it on two tourism destinations: Sorrento and Napoli. The methodology can be applied to other case studies.

2.2. The proposed theoretical model

Considering the above analyzed theory, coopetition as a possible source of advantage can be analyzed as though a revision of B & N's theory operationalization codified as PARTS framework, in the light of RBT and of its developments (relational view and absorptive capacity model). Thus the proposed model involves the following variables:

1) **Players:** This variable refers to the players that interact in the business, with specific attention to the threat of new entrants in the game that can change the set. We precisely refer to the main competitive actors deriving from IO's contributions (Porter, 1981 and ss) – direct competitors, clients, suppliers, substitutes and threats of entrance – at which it's necessary to add the complementors. These can be either some of the above mentioned players with whom the firm interacts for cooperative initiatives, thus reducing the intensity of threats, or some players in other industries whose relations reinforce the firm's position in the market. The main assumption regarding competitors, however, is that, according to resource-based theory, these are identified by similarities not among products or services but rather among resources and competencies. As regards in particular substitutes, it's worth taking into account not only the functional similarities relative to products-services provided but also with reference to resources (Peteraf, Bergen, 2003). This view has two important implications: a) resource substitution is an important issue both in attaining and sustaining competitive advantage; b) resource scarcity refers to its functionality rather than for its type, since it derives from its application to offered products-services on the market. On this regard, Peteraf and Bergen wrote:

Capability equivalence is the extent to which a given firm has resource and capability bundles comparable to those of the focal firm, in terms of their ability to satisfy similar customer needs.

This is nothing different from what Levitt asserted in 1960:

Firms compete not on the basis of similar resources but on the basis of whether their resources can be employed to meet similar customer needs.

This leads to the second variable (Added Value). It's however important to specify that with reference to strategic networks and systems the competitive set and dynamics is by far more complex and at a multiple level (single firms, dyadic relationships and firms-network level). In this context, however, we focus on actual and potential parties that can be identified as competitors, referring elsewhere the specific competitive process dynamics (Gnyawali, Madhavan, 2001).

2) **Added Value:** B&N mainly point out that players usually underestimate other players' true added value thus emphasizing the aspect of opportunistic behaviours. Our view is totally different, since the added value refers to the possibility of developing a positive-sum game through inter-firm collaboration. As explained, resources' value itself is connected with their functionality to the offered products and/or services. This concept of value, in fact, refers to the value in use: a product-service value depends on the use the customer can make of it (functional value or value in use). Firms may tend to satisfy the customer needs, in terms of bundle of services potentially provided to customer (or client), who, according to his personal background, has a certain value in use from the product. This approach requires a very "open-minded vision", according to which, also taking into account Service-dominant-logic approach (Mele, Della Corte, 2010; Vargo, Lusch, 2008), value is created not only through firms' resources *interactions* but also through their *integration*, in a networking perspective. Such a view is also interesting because it leads to a more dynamic competitive process, rather than making a simple analysis of actual competition.

3) The third variable, instead of referring to Rules, which imply contractual and legal relationships, considers **Relations**, both in terms of competition and collaboration.

As explained, we focus our analysis on strategic networks or even strategic systems, where the single firm is embedded in a network of relationships. This specific situation, strategically speaking also in RBT perspective, can lead to a vision of strategic network/system as loci of resources (Gnyawali, Madhavan, 2001, p. 432) and is relevant for a number of reasons: a) network relationships can be relevant potential conduits for internal resources (Nohria, 1992); b) network's resources and competencies develop and they can become complementary to those of the single firm (Langlois, 1992); c) the firm's position in the network can determine its rate of return on internal resources as well as the possible acquisition for it of new capabilities that can favour future strategic actions (McEvily and Zaheer, 1999; Powell, Koput, Smith Doerr, 1996).

In this direction, Relational View points out that firm's sources of competitive advantage can also reside in the network/system where it operates, which through a set of relations and specific investments, generate potential strategic knowledge and resources for its members. This approach has the merit of extending strategic resources generation beyond the boundaries of the single firm, thus overcoming the initial firm-centric approach, typical of resource-based theory. The sources of competitive advantage thus can depend on the idiosyncratic inter-firm linkages (Dyer, Singh, 1998: 661), usually classified in four main categories: specific investments, knowledge exchange processes, combination of complementary resources and capabilities, lower transaction costs, owing to network specific governance mechanisms. This view is extremely useful in contexts where inter-firm collaboration regards, in particular, small and medium enterprises. These ones, for their specific structures, are good at fostering innovation but often unable to get advantage from that innovation (Levy, Loebbecke, Powell, 2001).

Therefore, in rather structured collaborative frameworks, there are some important processes to take into account¹³:

- *synergy*, bound to the extent of cooperation, able to enlarge the overall value compared with the value created individually by the single firms, favoured by interactions. This process is bound to the synergy generated by the system that can become itself source of competitive advantage and to the synergy sensitive resources owned by single partners, whose combination increases the level of "strategicity" of resources as well as of the potential to generate further relational rents. This of course depends also on the firm's position in the network and on the eventual structural equivalence of partners (Gnyawali, Madhavan, 2001), thus needing to be integrated with competitive dynamics' analysis.

- *leveraging*: this variable has to be considered on a double perspective. The first refers to the leveraging of complementary resource endowments, in terms of partners' distinctive competences that collectively generate higher rents than individually (Dyer, Singh, 1998: 666). This process usually takes place when partners combine resources and/or develop co-joint idiosyncratic (and therefore indivisible) resources and capabilities both through interaction and integration (Grönroos, 2008, 2009; Vargo, Lush, 2008).

On this topic, some authors concentrate, in particular, on the transfer of information that (Zuchin, Di Maggio, 1990; Granovetter, 1992) depends on two forms of *embeddedness* (Gnyawali, Madhavan, 2001): *relational embeddedness*, i.e. the

¹³ This perspective involves studies of cooperation mechanisms through game theory. See Loebbecke, van Fenema, 1998; Van Hippels, 1988; Levy, Loebbecke, Powell, 2001).

ability of two actors sharing a relation to access the same hoard of information, to lessen uncertainty and promoting trust (reliability) amongst them, and *structural embeddedness* that is the global capacity of the network's configuration to facilitate information flows, thus allowing each involved actor to gain an advantage based on his or her "status" within the network (Podolny, 1993, 1994).

This process, on one hand, favours network density and its influence on response likelihoods: a competitor that initiates an action against another in the network, with an opportunistic behaviour, is seen negatively by the whole aggregate and therefore risks to be emarginated or neglected; on the other hand, the embeddedness process is valuable unless it reduces firms' overall flexibility in their strategic paths.

4) The fourth variable – Tactics – mainly refers to the possible opportunistic behaviours, for which it's better to keep the "fog", in order not to reveal competencies and knowledge the other parties can appropriate at the disadvantage of the initial owner. We, on the other hand, consider trust building behaviours. The variable, therefore, becomes: **Learning (and Innovation)**.

This reasoning is reinforced by the exploration-exploitation model, which takes into account the necessity for a firm or a network/system, to survive or better being competitive, to explore new possibilities and to exploit, at the same time, old certainties (March, 1991, p. 71). The balance between the twos is one of the main objectives for firms' survival or better success. In this view, the so created knowledge can increase both average performance and its relative variability (March, 1991: 84) but it is not necessarily the source of a firm's competitive success. Knowledge learning and rooting favour coordination and communication's process, making performance more reliable, but the real effects depend on the management of both knowledge and discovery attitude.

Transferring the question of knowledge so created through organizational learning to strategic networks and systems, two general situations come out: the mutual learning inside the system and learning and competitive advantage in competition for primacy. According to the former, the network stores some specific knowledge in terms of coordination mechanisms, information flows, rules and other forms of communication, more or less codified; at the same time, its members become more and more socialized to the network's main values and beliefs. Mutual learning, however, when characterized by high embeddedness from firms that take part to the system can become self-destructive: the created convergence can even become a threat to learning's effectiveness if individual members adjust to the network's code before the code can learn from them (March, 1991: 85).

The above analyzed aspects lead to the other perspective of the leveraging process that refers to

partners' different capabilities in exploiting relational resources. This ability refers to the different ability partners can have in identifying the potential value of a resource and of its use. This differences not only regard partners' previous experiences and knowledge (see the P variable – parties) but also their different search and evaluation capabilities of parties and of potential resources' use, here including others' strategies and actions. This recalls the firm's competitiveness within the network and its relative position (Gulati, 1995; Mitchell, Singh, 1996; Walker et al, 1997).

It is therefore important to verify whether within a system there are hints for innovation, through both inter-firm collaboration and competition. First, with reference to the risks connected with the more unfamiliar and uncertain exploration phase, external relations could be used to share the overall risk. The wider is the set of relations with external partners, the lower is the risk for the single firm. The overall set of relations can also help reducing the learning time and enriching knowledge itself of new contents: it favours knowledge development, through a quicker *exploitation* phase, also of new discoveries and can benefit of partners' capacity of developing knowledge from new acquired factors (Della Corte, Sciarelli, 2009).

This approach is useful because it conducts to a view of competition as a knowledge-based process, within which firms strive to acquire and develop capabilities quicker than their competitors (D'Aveni, 1994, Teece and Pisano, 1994). From this point of view, the absorptive capacity is a firm's ability to recognize value of new, external knowledge, assimilate it and apply it to commercial ends (Cohen, Levinthal, 1990: 128). This ability, according to absorptive capacity model, largely depends on the level of prior related knowledge (Bower, Hilgard, 1981), interpreted as a set of learning skills. In RBT perspective, this concept of cumulativeness recalls the concept of path dependence and even influences expectation formation, according to a process which is domain-specific and is path or history-path dependant (lockout process, Cohen, Levinthal, 1989): the more the firms invests in absorptive capacity, the more it can appreciate new external opportunities. Besides, Cohen and Levinthal assert that according to this perspective, learning capabilities are similar to problem solving, apart from the content: while the former regards the ability to assimilate existing knowledge, the latter implies the capacity of creating new knowledge.

In particular, interactive knowledge, generated by the interaction of more tacit components among partners is the more strategic in RBT terms, able to favour the "how and why" process (Lane, Lubakin, 1998).

This confirms that coepetition logic seems to be necessary to favour innovation in a well constructed and balanced system.

In this perspective, governance mechanisms can become important to favour competencies sharing and putting into action positive competitive behaviours.

Therefore, absorptive capacity model also helps defining the main capabilities in the learning interactive process within networks and precisely:

1) the ability to explore opportunities external to the system (outward component), implying knowledge diversity, which fosters innovation;

2) the efficiency in exploiting them (inward component);

3) the ability of learning through interaction, both at a firm-to-firm and at a firm-to-network level, also generating new collective knowledge (knowledge sharing and collective knowledge creation).

3. Some empirical evidence: methods and discussion

The above explained theoretical background is applied empirically, in order to verify in cooperation which relations appear to be relevant and if they can generate competitive advantage.

Empirical analysis is conducted in tourism industry, which is a very interesting sector for three main reasons:

- it is characterized by the presence of different companies (airline companies, tour operators, travel agents, hotels and resorts, restaurants, business attractions), whose products/services are strictly complementary in front of the tourist (Rispoli, Tamma, 1995). The complementarity, however, of different

services/products, depends on the resources and competencies complementarity in the industry (Hitt, Bierman, Shimizu, Kochhar, 2001; Hitt, Dacin, Levitas, Arregle, Borza, 2001). This of course represents a great incentive for firms to collaborate, even if of different size and of different governance forms (public companies rather than private-held or family owned enterprises). In the processes of destinations' investments, promotion and development, it's frequent to verify the presence of some inter-firm "slim and flexible" governance structures, private, public or public and private, that lead the process (Della Corte, 2000, 2004; Della Corte, Sciarelli, 2003; Barney, Della Corte, Sciarelli, 2005);

- it is characterized by a high variety of firms, both in terms of size and property structure, level of internationalization and strategic orientation: it is interesting to see how small and medium enterprises can be successful through strategic paths referred to niche market targets and compete successfully with huge, multinational groups;

- if the whole destination as a strategic network/system is the unit of analysis, several variables can be considered in order to verify the relations' impact on performance (measured in terms of overnights, GP generated by tourism in that area, accommodation firms' rates of occupancy) over time.

As regards the method, a non probabilistic sample has been selected, composed of:

	n
Interviewed Players	185
Naples	100
Sorr. Pen.	85

These are identified through the PPT model (product-project-territory – Sciarelli, 2007), which is a preliminary technique according to which through qualitative research (panels with the main local actors, materials and publications analysis) some inter-firm relations are singled out. The selected systems are then analysed through the cross-sectional case studies' method. In each of the identified territories a survey has been conducted, whose sample is obtained through cluster analysis, involving the most representative firms for location, size and sales, operating in tourist chain. With reference to different Italian destinations (both in Northern and Southern Italy: Naples, Sorrento Peninsula, Castelli Romani, Sannio, Treviso, Dolomiti, Marche's Systems), empirical evidence suggests that, even if Italian destinations can be at a different level of development, the "thematic" approach, based on resource-based theory and cooperation logic, applied to marketing choices, is really useful for a higher competitiveness of wider areas (regions, rather than

the entire Italian systems, especially in front of International markets).

The first empirical phase regarded the qualitative analysis and a comparison of two destinations in the same region: Naples and Sorrento Peninsula. The samples were stratified according to a stratified convenience process. The most relevant players in the business were identified for each area: hotels, restaurants, tour operators, travel agencies and other relevant local actors, respecting the population quotas. For each area (Naples and Sorrento), 70 and 75 firms were reached respectively, of whom 56 and 59 answered. The sample was therefore significant, and web information, plans, brochures and investment projects were analysed. We went through deep face-to-face interviews to local entrepreneurs or top managers. Most of the questions were indirect, in order to catch more realistic and true answers.

Our dependent variable was the destination (that is a place able to autonomously attract tourism demand) and its relative performance. This is

measured through some specific factors: arrives, overnights, available beds as proxy of local investments. Independent variables were identified for each of the research hypotheses (table 2).

Table 2. Independent variables and relative qualitative measures

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Measure</i>
Propensity to Collaboration in the area	
Preference for a specific form of collaboration	Implicit level of trust
Actions to improve integration	Awareness of collaboration's strategic potential
Actual collaboration in the area	
Managerial areas that are more invested by collaboration	Motivation to collaboration
Management of the most cited managerial area	Collaboration role in management
Participation to associations/consortia	Degree of consolidation of collaboration
Area promotional projects	Level of offer integration
Competition	
Perceived concurrent areas in the country	Competition's perception
Market target	Market positioning
Tangible and/or intangible investments in the area	Individual competitiveness
Collaboration with external actors	Individual competitiveness and positioning within the system

Source: our reworking

3.1. Discussion and conclusions

The main results of the empirical phase allowed us to check each of the research hypotheses as well as to interpret them in the light of the proposed theoretical model.

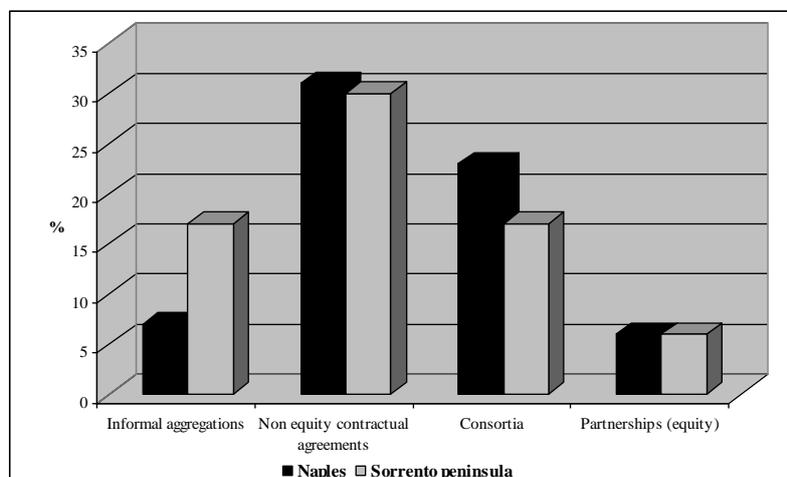
As regards hypothesis 1 - Propensity to collaboration helps the creation and development of inter-firm complex systems.

The first part of the analysis is focused on firms' behaviour towards "strategic alliances", in general. In particular, in our sample, it is clear that the interviewed firms are more inclined towards no-equity contractual agreements and then to consortia.

Instead, informal aggregations (for Naples) and partnerships (for both) seem to be less appealing. In addition, the result about the first ones highlights also another important aspect: Sorrento Peninsula' firms seem to be more interested into the strategic potentialities of informal aggregations. This result reflects the relevance of informal, knowledge sharing based relationship, in a continuous process of reciprocal knowledge.

According to our theoretical framework, therefore the influence of the collaboration behaviour on performance results has been analysed (figure 1; table 3).

Figure 1. Preferred collaboration behavior



Source: our reworking.

Table 3. Correlation analysis

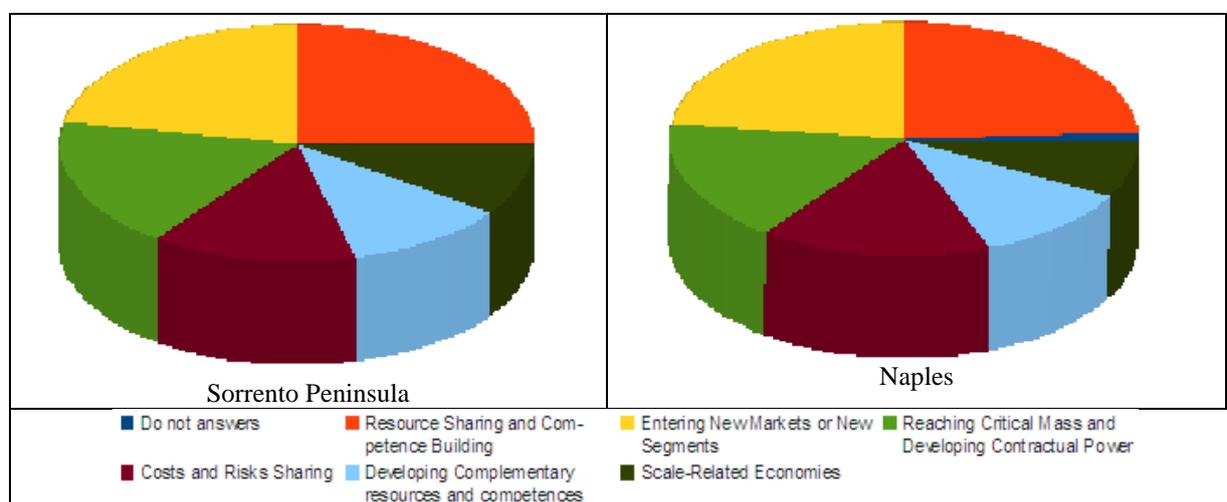
Area	Verifying the influence exerted on performance results by	Result
Peninsula Sorrentina	Coopetition strategy	+0,87
	Competition strategy	+0,68
Naples	Coopetition strategy	+0,72
	Competition strategy	+0,56

Source: our reworking.

By using the correlation analysis, we can immediately verify that the coopetition strategy is able to guarantee a better influence on performance results achieved by interviewed firms.

Therefore, we can suppose the existence of the important strategic opportunity to achieve a long-run competitive advantage.

Linking these results to the model, players are aware of the possibility of creating added value through inter-firm relations that are characterized by collaboration even among competitors (figure 2).

Figure 2. Usefulness of “shared with others” resources

Source: our reworking.

As regards hypothesis 2 - Continuous collaboration improves the system's overall performance (considered in a multidimensional perspective): firms can gain competitiveness when they are “unable or unwilling to cope with the complexity and risks of the environment” (Cravens, Ship & Cravens, 1993), in terms of market opportunities' increase and/or more efficiency in operations.

In order to verify this hypothesis, Guttman scale and η^2 index have been applied.

In particular, the first one is aimed at designing the firms' orientation to collaboration approach, conceived as a “multidimensional puzzle” where the number of partners, their role in the die and the type of inter-firms agreements are taken into account.

Our interest into the perfect Guttman scale is in its fundamental property: the cumulativity. It implies

that a subject that gives a correct¹⁴ answer to a difficult question, the same subject ought to give a correct answer to a simpler one.

Trough the Guttman scale, the firms' propensity to collaborative strategies can be measured. The items taken into account are:

1. existence/intensity of relations between firms and Institutions;
2. existence/intensity of relations between firms and professional associations;
3. existence/intensity of relations between firms and other actors of the die.

¹⁴ According to the model, we define “correct” the positive answer. In other words, we have dichotomous answers, codified (1 = Yes) and (0 = No). So, when the interviewed subjects answered yes, their answer is defined correct. We define “difficult” the question that requires a major quantity of property, i.e. in our case a better behaviour to collaboration approach.

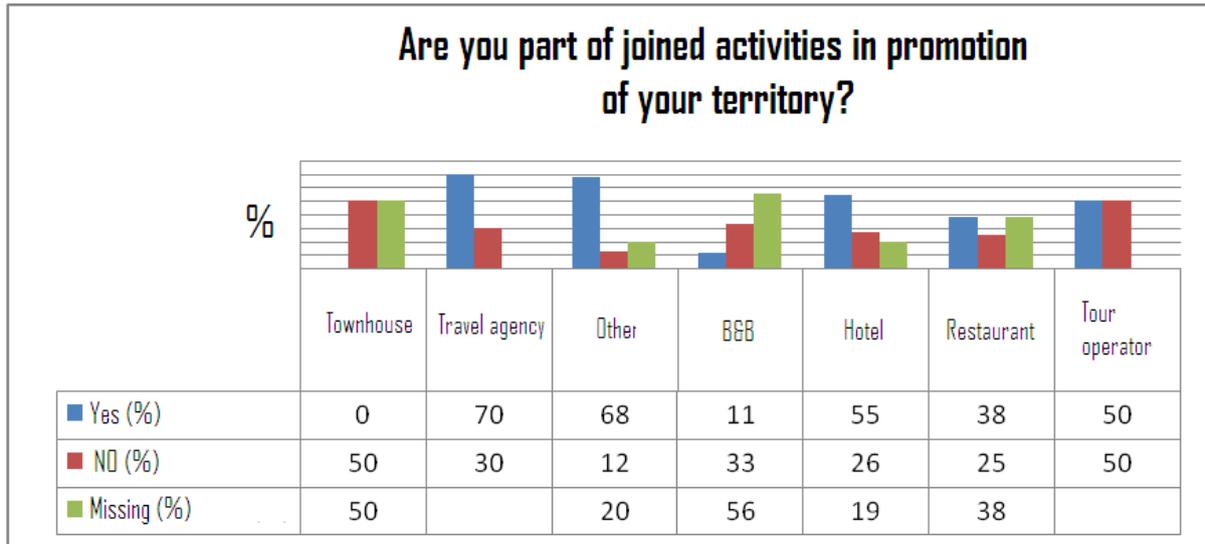
Trough the Guttman scale, the following profiles came out:

1. **profile A:** firms that have not important relations both with Institutions and Professional Associations.
2. **profile B:** firms that have important relations with Institutions and frequent and important relations with the Professional Associations.
3. **profile C:** firms that have important relations both with Institutions and Professional Associations.

In addition, they are in favor of cooperation with other actors of die and of International agreements.

4. **profile D:** those firms are in favor of inter-firms cooperation, they are parts of associations/consortia/etc., and they are in favor of pro-active actions for the promotion of their territory, conceived as destination.

Figure 3. Participation in promotional activities of own destination



Source: our reworking.

In particular, according to the other firms, the travel agencies are the most active ones: the 70% of

them declare to agree with promotional activities of the territory, conceived as a destination.

In general, in our sample we can observe.

Table 4. Intensity of coopetition

Are A&A useful to competition	Yes	Type of A&A	Yes
Naples	97%	Naples	97%
Sorr. Pen.	91%	Sorr. Pen.	91%

Source: our reworking.

In order to study the connection between the above described profiles and the performance results (measured trough a customer retention index), a chi squared has been used. Seeing that it can assume values in the range [0;1], the achieved results show

that the better strategic approach (i.e. the approach that is able to guarantee the better performance results) both in Naples and in Sorrento Peninsula is the third one:

Table 5. Chi squared analysis

	Profile A	Profile B	Profile C	Profile D
ETA quadro	0,25	0,39	0,72	0,54

Source: our reworking.

According to table 5, only the firms that 1) have important relations both with Institutions and Professional Associations and that 2) are in favor of cooperation with other actors of die and of International agreements, can obtain the best performance results. So, according to our analysis the relative impact of the single "Guttman profile" influences very much the achieved performance results.

As regards *hp. 3* - In situations where collaboration and competition are both high, the system's overall performance is higher than situations where collaboration is high but competition is low - this seems to be confirmed as well.

According to profiles C and D, a more in-deep analysis has been carried out. In particular, the cooperational approach was ideally divided in: 1) competition; 2) coopeitition; 3) collaboration.

Table 6. η^2 analysis

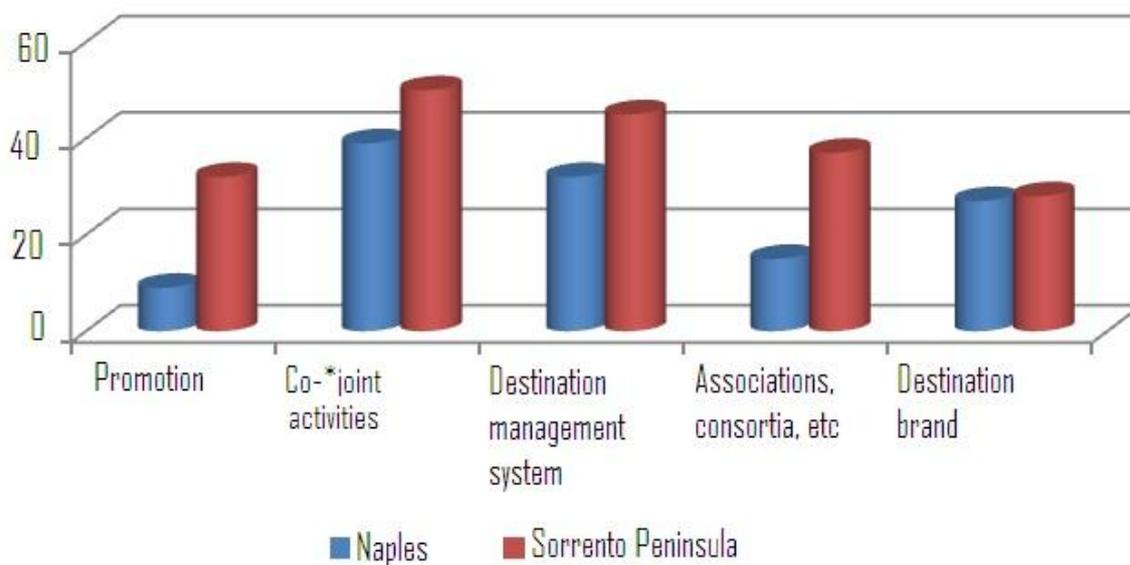
	competition	coopeitition	collaboration
Neaples	0,32	0,46	0,41
Sorrento Peninsula	0,26	0,74	0,53

Source: our reworking.

The coopeitition strategy seems to be able to guarantee the better results in terms of customer retention, both in Naples and in Sorrento Peninsula.

The different values can be understood thanks to the following graph:

Figure 5. Propensity to collaboration



Source: our reworking.

In fact, respect to Neapolitan firms', the actors of Sorrento Peninsula are more pro-active in participation and organization of collaboration activities.

Thus the conclusion is that coopeitition can be source of competitive advantage in strategic networks.

In fact, this paper has important implications, both theoretical and empirical. As regards the first aspect, it provides a new and richer content to coopeitition, inserting the topic within a complex theoretical set based on resource-based theory, relational view and the absorptive capacity model. The proposed framework also suggests a new vision

of competition studies and analyses, that cannot but take into account some social aspects of the relationship that can influence inter-firm interactions.

From a practical point of view, it is important to specify that, as results show, if both competition and collaboration are highly applied, a more profitable performance can be drawn considering that competition fosters innovation and collaboration reinforces the strategic strength also of small and medium enterprises as well as the relative strategic elasticity of the network, in terms of more and wider strategic opportunities.

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