

The ambivalent role of the intermediary in the face of opportunistic behaviour on the part of competitors

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show that an intermediary can, paradoxically, encourage opportunism among players in regulated competition under certain conditions. Contrary to what the literature advocates, the intermediary will henceforth have an ambivalent role. We have adopted a mixed-method approach, specifically using the comparative qualitative analysis in its multi-value version. The theory of justice and equity was used to explain the intermediary's position when faced with the opportunistic behavior of competitors. The primary data came from a questionnaire administered to 48 competitors in the transport sector in the Owendo commune of Gabon.

The results indicate that the intermediary has an impact on the opportunistic behavior of the competitors by paradoxically encouraging distrust or trust between actors; paradoxically and progressively, by punishing cheating competitors, starting with raising awareness, then reproaching them, and finally punishing them; encouraging an increase in actors' revenue; paradoxically balancing competition and cooperation or favoring competition to the detriment of cooperation; or maintaining the good or bad reputation of the actors. Therefore, the intermediary causes opportunism. Our results also show that players use opportunism to counteract the unfairness and inequity of the intermediary. Theoretical and managerial contributions are suggested.

Keywords : *Opportunism, Determinants, Competition, Intermediary, Roles, Impacts.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Opportunism is a complex behaviour that arises in interactions between economic agents. We adopt the approach of [Benjelloun and Balambo \(2016\)](#), for whom opportunism is a behaviour that destroys partnership relations. Partners show opportunism, that is, they always seek to make gains in transactions through a lack of openness and honesty, to the detriment of their contractual partners ([Arnaud, 2007](#)). Opportunism has negative consequences, both in terms of honouring partners' commitments and in terms of sharing the rent created through cooperation. An opportunistic partner only appropriates the rents of an alliance for a short period, but will lose future rents from the specific alliance and from its own investments over time ([Kumar Rajnish, 2016](#)). These problems are major obstacles to the coordination of partner companies ([Banoun et al., 2011](#)). [Granovetter \(2000\)](#) argues that opportunism is part of human nature and revolves around strictly self-interest, which can go as far as harming the other party. However, [Lecocq \(2004\)](#) finds that "opportunistic" and "dishonest" behaviour remains marginal at association level. There are several significant contributions on the subject of opportunism, the most recent of which are [Lumineau and Quelin \(2012\)](#), [Bodrov \(2014\)](#), [Yakovleva et al. \(2016\)](#). But the subject has been insufficiently studied ([Seliverstova et al., 2016](#)). Coopetition is not immune to opportunism ([Ngidjima, 2017](#)) and an intermediary can provide "a guarantee as to the fairness of the exchange and the legal value of the terms of the contract" ([Neysen et al., 2007](#)). [Hiesse et al \(2009\)](#) emphasise that the intermediary can limit interactions between members of the cooperative network in order to make himself indispensable. They bring players together ([Obstfeld, 2005](#)), but they can also take advantage of their position as intermediary to act opportunistically ([Simmel, 1950](#); [Fernandez et al., 2014](#); [Zaoual, 2015](#)). An intermediary, as a neutral actor, takes on the task of framing the exchange and thus reduces the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour ([Raes, 2017](#)).

We position this research in the field of strategy at a micro level to capture this behaviour in an inter-individual relational context, particularly between individual firms. [Zaoual \(2015\)](#) points out that small firms, which have limited bargaining power, are often subject to opportunistic behaviour. We follow in the footsteps of [Luo et al \(2018\)](#) who in no way assert that any other dimension has no influence on guarantee mechanisms on the problem of opportunistic behaviour and that they only represent a first step towards a better understanding of the link between type of opportunism and mechanisms to counter them. We will also include work on brokers. The literature recognises that economic problems can be misinterpreted if opportunism is ignored. This research investigates opportunistic behaviour between individual entrepreneurs operating in intermediary-regulated coopetition in the transport sector. In the literature in general, the intermediary is perceived in coopetition as moderating or dissuading opportunism. Nevertheless, we will try to explore the

possibility that he is the instigator of opportunistic behaviour. We then ask the question: "What is the impact of an intermediary on opportunism in a coopetition between individual firms? The objective of this research is to show the effects of an intermediary on the opportunistic behaviour of clandos in a coopetition. In the literature, the intermediary tends to reduce the effects of competition. It promotes inter-organisational and inter-individual cooperative relationships. The main interest of this research is to add new knowledge to the literature on opportunism. To answer this question, we will present the context of the research, then a conceptual and theoretical framework, followed by the methodological framework, the results, their discussion and the managerial implications, and finally the conclusion.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

We present opportunism in its various forms, the mechanisms for controlling it and the role of the intermediary and its influence on the opportunism of coopetitors. We also present the theory of justice, emphasising the role of the trust it creates.

2.1. Actors' opportunism and intermediary in coopetition

We present the definitions of the concept of opportunism in its two dimensions, intermediary and coopetition.

2.1.1. Definitions and generalities

The question of the opportunism of partners in a relationship is highlighted and recognised in the literature, when we talk about problems relating to the risk of loss or plundering of resources or divergence of interests and objectives specific to the partners. [Williamson \(1985\)](#) defines opportunism as "the pursuit of self-interest with subtlety" [Luo et al \(2018\)](#) define opportunism as behaviour that takes advantage of asymmetry and knowledge outcomes by favouring valuable agents and downgrading the value of other agents.

[Benjelloun and Balambo \(2016\)](#) define social and relational opportunism as: "The violation of social norms or formal or informal relationships established between partners either by agreement or expectations on previous actions between them and without any legal recourse". They equate it with selfish behaviour or the violation of a norm expected or established at the outset. [Yakovleva et al \(2016\)](#), [Banoun et al \(2011\)](#) and [Peillon \(2001\)](#) propose two forms of opportunistic behaviour, namely hold-up behaviour and stowaway behaviour. [Brousseau \(1989\)](#) explains hold-up as "an individual will respect the letter but not the spirit of his commitments if an opportunity arises to capture part of the surplus intended for his co-contractor(s)". As for the behaviour of the stowaway or free-rider, [Brousseau \(1993\)](#) explains that it is linked to "the losses caused by one agent when he does not provide the consideration expected by the other and the latter cannot measure exactly the damage he suffers". Opportunism has a rich variety of forms ([Wilson, 2006](#); [Broda, 2009](#), [Benjelloun and Balambo, 2016](#)).

It consists of the cunning pursuit of self-interest, including lying, bad faith, theft and deception, cheating, deception, forgery, manipulation, bluffing, broken promises, breach of trust, violation of social and relational norms, distortion of information, selfishness, blackmail, reintroduction of competition, appropriation of value, underperformance, etc. (Wilson, 2006; Broda, 2009; Benjelloun and Balambo, 2016). For Roy (2010), co-opetition is a relationship that reflects a situation where two or more companies are both competitors and partners. As for Dagnino et al (2007), co-opetition is a convergence of interests between complementary firms when cooperation and competition occur simultaneously. Co-opetition can be regulated by an intermediary (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000) or a third-party actor (Hannachi and Coléno, 2012). The intermediary may be an individual, an organisation or a State (Albert-Cromarias and Labarre, 2016). The intermediary can play a number of roles, including coordinator, controller, facilitator, regulator, mediator, initiator, broker, architect, approver, legitimator and peacemaker (Bengtsson and Kock 2000; Geindre, 2005; Dagnino et al., 2007; Jacobides, 2007; Hiesse et al., 2009; Salvetat and Géraudel, 2011).

2.1.2. Co-opetition and opportunism

The risk of opportunism is increased by competition occurring simultaneously with the need to collaborate (Salvetat and Géraudel, 2011). Co-opetition is a strategic relationship presented as fragile in the face of presumed opportunism on the part of partners (Granata, 2014; Assens, 2011; Salvetat and Géraudel, 2011). The sole criterion for the effectiveness of institutions and organisations is to prevent people from cheating (Favereau, 2016). Game theory and the famous prisoner's dilemma (Rappoport and Chammah, 1965) show that competing players will prefer confrontation to cooperation because of the risk of opportunism on the part of one of the players. Salvetat and Géraudel (2011) emphasise that players tend to prefer cooperation to opportunism since their relationships are long-term and all players are winners. For companies in competition, it appears that it is the risk of opportunism on the part of the competitor that acts as a brake on cooperation (Williamson, 1975). Orléan (1994) shows that the actor who grants his trust is faced with a reluctance to cooperate. An external member can catalyse the actors' need to collaborate (Baumard, 2010). We put forward hypothesis H0: "the more the intermediary encourages co-opetitors to compete rather than cooperate, the more opportunistic they will be".

2.1.3. Intermediary and opportunism

An intermediary can act as a guarantor of the smooth running of the co-opetitive relationship. Orléan (1994) indicates that a third actor can play the role of intermediary and mediator. The presence of an intermediary is useful when the co-opetitive relationship is initiated (Salvetat and Géraudel, 2011). All manifestations of opportunistic behaviour in a contractual relationship, can be implemented with the participation of third parties and without them (Seliverstova et al., 2016). The intermediary must have the capacity to arbitrate the transaction by ensuring its compliance (Neysen et al., 2007). A key

factor in the successful formation of a network is when the intermediary is not a stakeholder (Dumoulin et al., 2000; Geindre, 2005). According to Burt (1992), the intermediary between several other players can determine the rules of the relationship which become a contract for the cooptitors. The intermediary seems to enable competitors to protect themselves against the opportunistic behaviour of partners Hiesse (2009a, 2009b). The third party ensures the coherence of the collective strategy (Gundolf et al., 2006) by reconciling the interests of the different protagonists (Tellier, 2006; Loubaresse and Pestre, 2012). Third-party enhancement in a dyadic relationship prevents opportunism on the part of its partners (Fernandez and Le Roy, 2015). The matchmaker lowers the intensity of competition in order to bring the players together and implements a kind of avoidance strategy, pacifying relations (Soumaya and Rabeau, 2012). The matchmaker plays the role of intermediary when building a cooperative relationship in order to avoid opportunistic behaviour (Obstfeld, 2005). The decision-maker intermediary is a coordinator (Miles and Snow, 1992) who tends to reduce the risk of opportunism by controlling and arbitrating conflicts (Perrone, 1993). He ensures that the cooperative process runs smoothly and that the rules are respected (Fréry, 1997; Assens, 2003). The intermediary-decision-maker has a control function (Burt, 1992) and benefits from his position as intermediary (Simmel, 1950). Despite the use of the third-party actor, opportunistic behaviour on the part of service providers - who feel threatened by collective action - persists (Zaoual, 2015). Nevertheless, actors must also have confidence in the intermediary (Salvetat and Géraudel, 2011). We infer hypothesis H1: "the intermediary reduces the opportunism of cooptitors."

- Trust

Trust is a belief based on the anticipation of others, or on their ability to renounce opportunism (Bornarel, 2007). Trust already underlies research into the determinants of opportunism (John, 1984). Nogatchewsky and Donada (2007) point out that trust itself is at the root of opportunism because it leads to a reduction in vigilance and control on the part of the person who trusts. To combat the risk of opportunism and promote successful cooperation, it is essential to introduce trust between the players (Yan and Gray, 1994; Doz, 1996). Shared values and a convergence of interests seem to limit the risk of opportunism and foster a strong community spirit characterised by cohesion and stability (Allouche and Amann, 1999). To neutralise the motivations for opportunistic behaviour, Seliverstova et al (2016) suggest raising the level of trust in relationships and strengthening the network links between participants. The gift of trust, expressed through the acceptance of one's vulnerability to opportunism, leads to the establishment of informal steering mechanisms based on self-control (Aissaoui et al., 2017). The introduction of an intermediary to guarantee cooperation in the decision-making process fosters this trust (Assens, 2013). A third party can represent the guarantor of trust and can prevent opportunism on the part of the trustee, by putting pressure tactics in place (Salvetat and Géraudel, 2011). By limiting the occurrence of opportunistic behaviour (Hiesse et al., 2009), the third party guarantees inter-

organisational trust (McEvily and Zaheer, 2004; Geindre, 2005). We therefore put forward hypothesis H2: "the more the intermediary encourages competitors to trust each other, the less opportunistic they will be".

2.1.4. Solving the problem of opportunism

Benghazala et al (2017), Brousseau (2000) and Wu and Choi (2004) advocate mechanisms to limit opportunism and protect the potentially harmed. Luo et al. (2018) point out that it is important to eliminate such selfish behaviour in multi-agent systems, as it has undesirable outcomes for agents. The risk of opportunism can be moderated by horizontal alliance (Das, 2006), reputation and/or punishment.

- Reputation

Reputation refers to the way in which a brand, company, person, etc. is known. Rubin (1990) suggests using reputation. "Reputation is the way in which an organisation is perceived and evaluated by its stakeholders in terms of its ability to generate value compared to its peers and competitors" (Philippe and Durand, 2009). Service companies wishing to increase their value and ensure a sustainable revenue stream need to build and maintain assets such as reputation and brand image (Sharp, 1996). The impact of exemplarity reflects the existence of both vicious and virtuous circles: negative and inconsistent attitudes lead to opportunistic behaviour, while positive and consistent attitudes lead to trustworthy behaviour (Wicks et al., 1999). Kreps (1990) argues that a partner's reputation is good if it has never cheated, and irreparably tainted at the first defection. Any opportunistic behaviour risks compromising the reputation and calling into question the credibility of its cooperative signals in the future (Aissaoui et al., 2017). Luo et al. (2018) believe that opportunistic behaviour deteriorates reputation within the network. The reputation of an intermediary is de facto transferable to another agent through trust (Roda, 2005). Granata (2014) argues "I am convinced that by helping to improve the reputation of competing authors, I am helping to improve the dissemination of the concept of cooperation and, by the same token, to develop the production of knowledge. If I play the individual card, I may gain a lot on my own, but I may also gain nothing at all". An opportunistic company can absorb its partner's knowledge and thus put an end to the alliance, once its reputation or knowledge has improved sufficiently to operate on its own (Norris, 1992). On the basis of the above, we put forward hypothesis H3: "the more the intermediary maintains a good reputation among the competitors, the less opportunistic they will be".

- Sanctioning

Cooperation networks are ecosystems in which opportunists are ejected (Soumaya and Rabeau, 2012). The authors argue that the ecosystem is no longer healthy when actors adopt opportunistic transactional behaviour. Zaoual (2015) points out that it is difficult for associations to sanction opportunistic behaviour (Noireaux and Poirel, 2014). Soumaya and Rabeau, (2012) argue that there are preventive and punitive measures for opportunistic behaviour. Thus, an economic agent must behave

correctly and thus gain the trust of his peers. Opportunistic behaviour is constrained by the threat of exclusion from the project rather than the threat of litigation (Luo et al., 2018). The latter note that with "slackers", the possibility of excluding the partner from future business opportunities constitutes credible potential sanctions. The pivot (taken here as an intermediary) thus establishes direct guarantees so that any opportunistic behaviour can be sanctioned immediately (Luo et al., 2018). They continue that the contract encourages the contracting parties to keep their promises and behave honestly. We then infer hypothesis H4: "the intermediary who sanctions coopeititors reduces their opportunism."

2.2. Theoretical background: theory of justice and equity

We have listed a number of theories used in work on opportunism, based on 197 articles on the subject. We found that contract theory was cited 64 times, transaction cost theory 53 times, the theory of the firm 38 times, and the theory of justice and equity 26 times. This paper uses the theory of justice and equity (distributive, procedural and interactional). This is because the intermediary who ensures that coopeitition works properly must be ethical, fair, impartial and just. The concept of fairness in Adams' (1965) theory of equity presupposes that we must determine the criteria for distributing the fruits of our social cooperation, starting from the idea that we are all, a priori, moral equals. We owe each other equal respect. Everyone should have a fair chance, and should be treated fairly, but the deserving should get more than the undeserving. Rawls (1989) shows that if people are treated fairly, they will accept the principles of justice as fair. We mobilise the three dimensions of distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Distributive justice generally concerns the stakeholders in an organisation recognising their rights to be treated fairly, equitably and with respect. It also concerns the way in which resources should be distributed fairly among the players (coopeititors). The procedural dimension concerns the methods used by the intermediary to achieve the distribution of resources (compliance with the rules and practices of the intermediary). It concerns participation in the decision-making process and the accessibility of stakeholders to those in charge. This dimension is of interest to the coopeititors and the intermediary. The interactional dimension concerns the explanation and justification of decisions taken with regard to stakeholders, honesty, which is the way in which they perceive the information provided to them, politeness, respect, courtesy and even empathy on the part of the manager towards the stakeholders. (Seliverstova et al., 2016) point out that opportunism is constrained by notions of justice. Nevertheless, today the Machiavellian principle of "the end justifies the means" dominates and the ethical dimension is ignored (Yakovleva et al., 2016). The lack of neutrality and impartiality (Loubaresse and Pestre, 2012) can lead the third-party actor to free himself from defending the interests of his original adherents. The behaviours engendered in the pursuit of justice are a source of risk, particularly opportunism, by cheating on the rules. To reduce the risks, the "slacker" chooses actions that are not controlled or not punishable. Non-cooperation is one of the indicators of unfairness. If the "slacker" is not satisfied, he can restore justice by cheating. However,

there may be cases where inequity is tolerated. If a cooperator perceives that he is being treated fairly or justly, he will behave in a cooperative manner, with a view to facilitating the work of colleagues. We therefore infer hypothesis H5: "Unfair and inequitable intermediaries encourage opportunism among cooperators". Fair and just treatment promotes organisational performance and makes a powerful contribution to the effectiveness and efficiency of organisational operations" (Rojot, 2003) and encourages effort (Scholl et al., 1987). Conflict between cooperators is considered by Benjelloun and Balambo (2016), among others, to be opportunistic behaviour, and the intermediary would encourage an improvement in the level of performance, if a solution is found (Assassi, 2005). However, studies analysing the impact of conflict on overall performance present contradictory results (Stern et al., 2001). Luo et al (2018) believe that in the event of a contractual breach with the intermediary, cooperators will suffer very high losses. We hypothesise H6: "the more the intermediary favours the increase in cooperators' revenues, the more opportunistic they will be."

2.3. Hypothetical model

The analytical scheme suggests that the intermediary reduces opportunistic behaviour. He influences the balance of cooperation or its imbalance in favour of competition; he fosters trust or mistrust between stowaways; he brandishes sanctions against stowaways who do not comply with the initial parking rule; he influences the increase or decrease in stowaway revenues; he observes the reputation of stowaways. Each variable has a positive, negative or mixed effect on the opportunistic behaviour of stowaways.

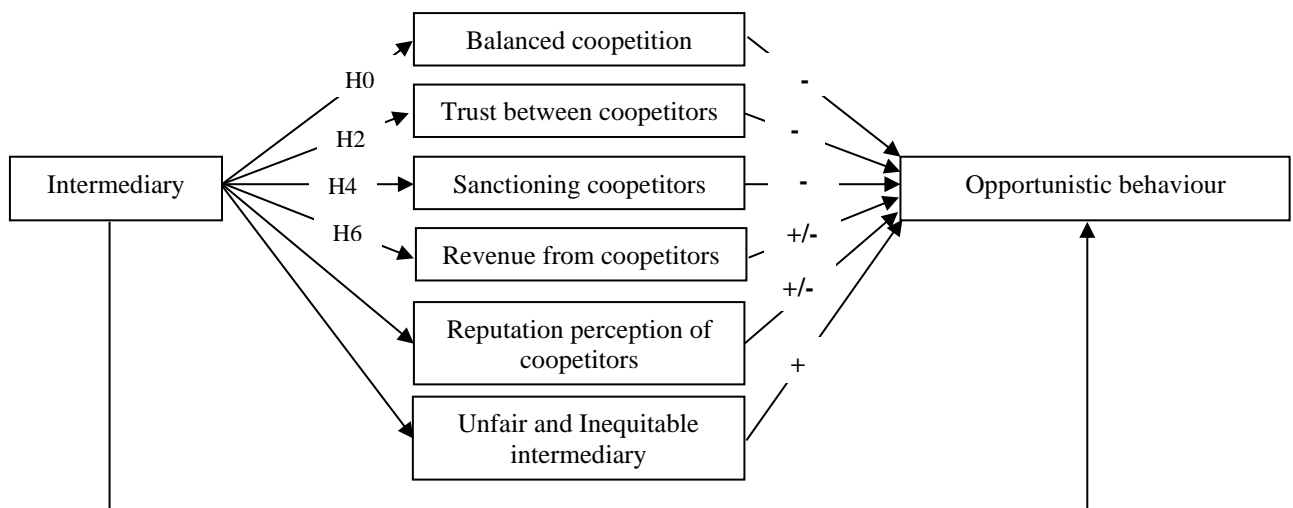


Figure 1: Hypothetical model of the intermediary faced with opportunism

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

We present, in turn, the sources of the study data and a summary of the stakeholders' responses, the methodology and data processing technique, and then the variables and their measurements.

3.1. Data

We present the context of coopetition between clandos regulated by an intermediary. The existence of under-integrated neighbourhoods provided an opportunity for artisans to engage in a new suburban transport activity in the 2000s, the clando. These are craftsmen or individual entrepreneurs who put their often dilapidated, second- or third-hand vehicles at the service of people living in these under-integrated neighbourhoods, which are difficult to reach by conventional taxis that refuse to serve them. The reasons for their absence are: the poor state of the roads; the prevailing insecurity; untimely police checks; or the remoteness of these areas, which are unprofitable for conventional taxis. The activity has developed considerably over the last fifteen years (2005-2020). It often takes place in a place known as a "terminus", "fin tar" or "clando", where ordinary taxis drop off customers and then clandos take over to take them home. The way this business works is that the various vehicles park in order of arrival, lining up to pick up their customers. In an incremental process from the head of the queue to the tail, the vehicles gradually fill up (4 to 5 customers) in an average time of between 5 and 10 minutes. When all the spaces are occupied, the clando starts up and the next one takes the lead to fill up, and so on. The average number of customers transported daily is 60 to 70 per vehicle. Journey prices range from 100 to 300 CFA francs, depending on distance and time of day. After 9pm, the price doubles. Customers may offer more than the normal price, in which case they are said to "bet". One person, the intermediary, can regulate parking and the business. This is often a popular person recognised in the area as enjoying relative leadership and social activism in the area. They may be chosen by the clandos. In most cases, they are self-employed, but the municipal authorities appoint them to legitimise their authority.

He ensures that the network runs smoothly, settles any disputes, makes it easier for customers to get into the clandos, and coordinates and monitors the activity. There are areas where activity is self-regulated by the clandos themselves. These huts cooperate in certain situations, for example to arrange a parking area or to keep the business going. At the same time, they are in competition with each other, particularly with regard to the first-stop rule, customers, fares, revenue, working hours, customer safety and comfort, etc. We often observe cases of deviance on the part of a few illegals who from time to time break the initial parking rule. They cheat, so they behave opportunistically. The data used was primary. They were collected by means of a questionnaire containing 37 closed and open-ended questions, administered to 48 illegal immigrants in parking areas located in the Owendo commune of

Gabon. Each location surveyed had an average of 20 stowaways. These were Pétro, Carrefour SNI, Cité la SNI, Carrefour Agungu and Akournam 2. The Owendo commune has a total of around 110 illegal immigrants. Table 1 summarises the responses from the clandos.

Table 1: Summary of questionnaire responses

Number of respondents	%	Answers
48	56%	Coopetitors feel that they are in coopetition, 75% of whom feel that they are more in competition than in cooperation all the time and 58% of whom feel that they are more in cooperation than in competition occasionally.
48	52%	Coopetitors behave opportunistically by breaking the first-parking rule
33	46%	Coopetitors think that the intermediary is a facilitator.
33	35%	Coopetitors think that the intermediary is a coordinator.
33	31%	Coopetitors think that the intermediary is the controller.
33	46%	Coopetitors perceive that the intermediary is fair and impartial.
33	46%	Coopetitors feel that the intermediary respects them and shows them consideration.
33	8%	Coopetitors feel that they trust the intermediary.
33	61%	Coopetitors think that the intermediary encourages cooperation.
33	46%	Coopetitors think that the intermediary helps to resolve conflicts between them.
33	40%	Coopetitors believe that the intermediary allows them to have the same level of income.
33	37%	Coopetitors think that the intermediary allows them to reduce their income.
33	24%	Coopetitors think that the intermediary allows them to increase their revenue
33	67%	Coopetitors believe that without an intermediary, they would increase their revenue
33	23%	Coopetitors believe that without an intermediary, they would maintain the same level of revenue
33	11%	Coopetitors believe that without an intermediary, their revenue would be reduced

3.2. Research methodology and processing technique

Our methodological anchoring is mixed, qualitative and quantitative, based on the technique of comparative quantitative analysis (QCA) in its multivariate version (mvQCA). This QCA technique was developed by Ragin (1987) using a mathematical foundation of Boolean algebra and set theory. It is increasingly used in management science (Garreau and Romelaer, 2019, p.260-280, a work that can serve as a guide for QCA) and management (Grandori and Furnari, 2008). Garreau and Romelaer (2019) point out that this method is suitable for studies with an intermediate number of cases (10 to 50, or even more). In general, the technique takes place in 3 stages, the selection of empirical cases and conditions, then the calibration of the data (operationalisation) and finally the analysis and interpretation of the results (Garreau and Romelaer, 2019). Thiem and Dusa (2013) argue that the QCA technique has become the method of choice for testing hypotheses based on configurations. It has 4 variants csQCA, fsQCA, tQCA and mvQCA. The mvQCA variant remains underused (Thiem and Dusa, 2013). Three references for mvQCA are the user guide by Cronqvist (2016), the article by Haesebrouck (2016) and the book by Thiem and Dusa (2013, p.82-90). The mvQCA variant thus avoids relatively crude dichotomisation and, unlike the other variants, better captures the wealth of information in the raw data. It allows some explanatory conditions to have more than two modalities, generally

three or four, in order to take more subtle groups into account. Unlike the other variants, it allows intermediate values to be used to indicate degrees of membership or adherence of empirical cases. The number of lines in the truth table, which will give the formal expressions of the number of logically possible combinations or configurations, is given by the formula $N(\text{mvQCA})=2k_2 * 3k_3 \dots * n_k$ where k_i =the number of conditions and n =number of modalities. In this paper, we have 2 binary conditions, 1 condition with 3 modalities and 1 condition with 4 modalities: $2^2 * 3^1 * 4^1 = 48$. Our sample size is appropriate because we interviewed 48 clandos. The Tosmana 1.61 software developed by Cronqvist (2018) was used for all data processing.

3.3. Variables and their measures

Seliverstova et al (2016) point out that the causal relationship between opportunistic behaviour and the characteristics of contractual relationships, requires further evidence. Opportunistic behaviour is among the main determinants of the failure of partnership agreements, risking the interruption and termination of exchange relationships (Benjelloun and Balambo, 2016).

For our purposes, we retained the variable explained as coded opportunistic behaviour (OPPORTUNISM), which represents the cheating of clandos in relation to the established rule of primo-stationnement. The explanatory conditions are : REPUTATION(i) which represents the perceived reputation of the clando by customers in a zone. REPUTATION(1) is a bad reputation of the clando as taking his work casually, using ungentlemanly language or being considered as unhelpful and therefore has negative attitudes; REPUTATION(2) represents a good reputation of the clando as being helpful, friendly, open, using courteous language, taking his work seriously and therefore has positive attitudes; DOMINATE(i) which represents the balance or lack of balance between the two components of cooptation, competition and cooperation. DOMINATE(0), cooptation is unbalanced in favour of competition and DOMINATE(1), it is in equilibrium; TRUST(i) represents mutual trust between clandos. TRUST(0) is distrust between clandos and TRUST(1) is trust between them; REVENUE(i) is a 3-ary condition, representing the level of revenue of clandos, REVENUE(0) revenue decreases, REVENUE(1) revenue is at the same level and REVENUE(2) revenue increases; SANCTION(i) is a 4-ary variable representing the penalty imposed on clandos by the intermediary. SANCTION(0) is laissez-faire, no intervention by the intermediary, SANCTION(1) the intermediary intervenes but there is no penalty; SANCTION(2) is the intermediary's criticism of clandos, SANCTION(3) is the penalty imposed on the cooptators.

Table 2: variables

Variables	Number	Values	
OPPORTUNISM	1 value	Opportunism or cheating	
REPUTATION(i)	2 values	i=1 : Bad reputation	i=2 : Good reputation

Variables	Number	Values	
DOMINATE(i)	2 values	i=0 : Unbalanced coopetition	i=1 : Balanced coopetition i.e. Cooperation=Competition
TRUST(i)	2 values	i=0 : Distrust	i=1 : Trust
REVENUE(i)	3 values	i=0 : Reduce revenue	i=1 : Same level of revenue
		i=2 : Increase revenue	
SANCTION(i)	4 values	i=0 : Permissiveness	i=1 : Awareness/advice
		i=2 : Reproach/warning	i=3 : Sanctions

4. RESULTS, DISCUSSIONS AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

In what follows, we present the results which are the formulae of opportunistic behaviour and their interpretations in coopetition with and without intermediaries; we then discuss these results by comparing them with the work of other researchers; finally, we present the managerial and theoretical contributions.

4.1. Research results: interpretations and decisions on the hypotheses

The results are of two kinds, namely the two formulae of the opportunistic behaviour of the clandos, the first takes into account the 48 cases of clandos in coopetition with and without intermediary and the second takes into account the 15 cases of clandos in coopetition without intermediary. The last result is the formula for the impact of the intermediary on the opportunism of the clandos in this coopetition.

4.1.1. Results with the 48 clandos in coopetition

The opportunistic behaviour of the clandos is explained by : (F1)

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \text{SANCTION}\{1\} * [\text{REVENUE}\{0\} + \text{DOMINATE}\{0\}] && + \\
 & \text{SANCTION}\{3\} * \text{DOMINATE}\{0\} * [\text{REPUTATION}\{2\} && + \text{REVENUE}\{0\}] && + \\
 & \text{SANCTION}\{0,1\} * \text{REPUTATION}\{1\} && + && \text{SANCTION}\{2\} * \text{DOMINATE}\{1\} && + \\
 & \text{DOMINATE}\{0\} * [\text{REVENUE}\{1\} * \text{TRUST}\{1\} && + && \text{REVENUE}\{2\} * \text{TRUST}\{0\} * \text{REPUTATION}\{2\}] \\
 \Rightarrow & \text{OPPORTUNISM}
 \end{aligned}$$

In other words, the opportunism of the clando is explained by the following exclusive conditions:

- if the intermediary paradoxically sensitises the cheating clandos (Et): if he balances the coopetition, he favours the decrease of the clandos' revenues (Ou). This result partially confirm H6 and partially confirm H0, but we also obtain the unexpected result that a coopetition balanced by the intermediary, i.e. where competition and cooperation are at the same level, also encourages opportunism.

- if the intermediary paradoxically punishes cheating stowaways (And) if it paradoxically balances coopetition (And): if the stowaways paradoxically have a good reputation;(Or) if the intermediary paradoxically favours a reduction in their revenue. This result allows us to partially confirm hypothesis

H6, partially confirm H0, invalidate H3 and H4. We also obtain a counter-intuitive result that the bad reputation of the clandos also favours opportunism if the intermediary is permissive.

- if the intermediary paradoxically penalises the cheating clandos (And) that it unbalances cooperation in favour of competition; This result allows us to invalidate H4 and partially confirm H0. We also obtain the unexpected result that a cooperation balanced by the intermediary, i.e. where competition and cooperation are at the same level, also favours opportunism.

- if the intermediary is laissez-faire (or permissive) (And) if the clandos have a bad reputation. This result allows us to invalidate the hypothesis H3 and H4.

- if the intermediary paradoxically balances cooperation (And): that it allows the stowaways' revenues to remain at the same level (And) that it paradoxically promotes trust between stowaways; (Or) if the intermediary promotes an increase in the stowaways' revenues (And) that it encourages them to distrust each other (And) that it paradoxically maintains the stowaways' good reputation. These results allow us to partially confirm the hypothesis H0, partially confirm hypothesis H6, invalidate H2 and H3. We obtain a counter-intuitive result if the intermediary maintains the stowaways' bad reputation and, if he is permissive, then the stowaways are opportunists.

4.1.2. Results with 15 players in cooperation without intermediary

Opportunistic behaviour is explained by the formula :

$$\text{REPUTATION}\{1\} + \text{TRUST}\{1\} * \text{DOMINATE}\{0\} \Rightarrow \text{OPPORTUNISM}$$

In other words, opportunistic behaviour is displayed if the clandos have a bad reputation; or if, paradoxically, they trust each other and if cooperation without an intermediary is balanced. This result shows that bad reputation, trust between clandos and the balance between cooperation and competition are not necessarily controlled by the intermediary. So the clandos themselves, by self-regulating in this cooperation, experience opportunism through the three previous conditions.

4.1.3. Impact of the intermediary on the opportunism of cooperation clandos

To triangulate the opportunism formula obtained with the 33 clandos in cooperation with intermediary and 15 clandos without intermediary, we performed the set operation "complement" with the formula resulting from the 15 clandos in cooperation without intermediary. The impact of the intermediary on the opportunistic behaviour of the players is given by: (F2)

$$\text{TRUST}\{0\} + \text{REVENUE}\{2\} \text{TRUST}\{1\} + \text{SANCTION}\{1\} + \text{SANCTION}\{2\} + \text{SANCTION}\{3\}$$

$$\Rightarrow \text{IMPACT}[\text{OPPORTUNISM}]$$

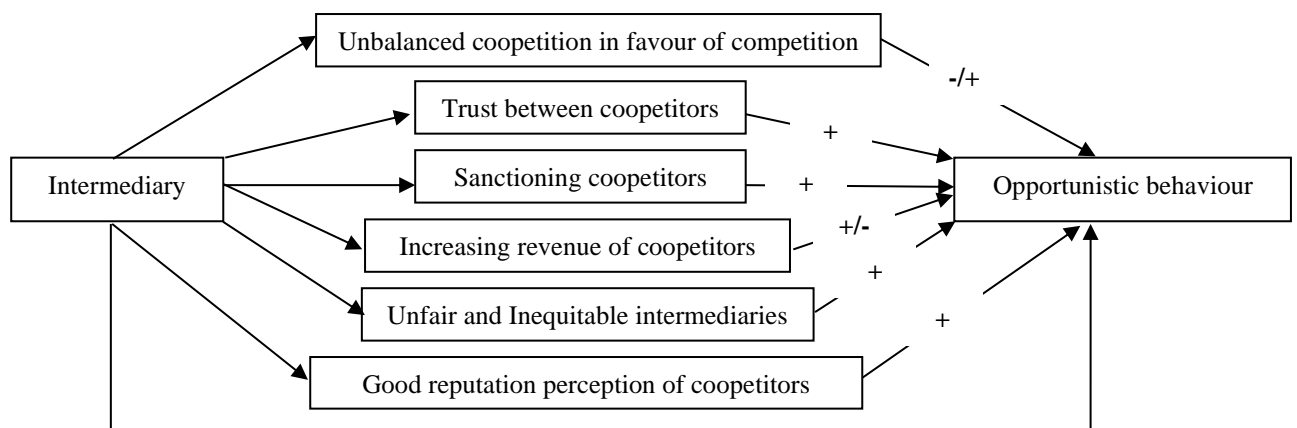
In other words, the intermediary has an impact on the opportunistic behaviour of illegal immigrants if he or she encourages illegal immigrants to distrust each other; (or) if he or she paradoxically encourages mutual trust between illegal immigrants and paradoxically favours an

increase in illegal immigrants' revenue; or if he or she paradoxically and progressively punishes cheating illegal immigrants by first raising their awareness, then reproaching them and finally punishing them. This result partially confirms the hypothesis H6 and refutes hypotheses H4 and H2. We also obtained a counter-intuitive result indicating that encouraging distrust encourages opportunistic behaviour. Furthermore, based on the results on the impact of the intermediary, we invalidate hypothesis H1: "the intermediary reduces the opportunism of coepetitors". We also find that the intermediary has differentiated practices and interventions with regard to clandos. We therefore confirm the hypothesis H5: "the unfair and inequitable intermediary encourages opportunism among coepetitors".

We summarise the decisions on the hypotheses in [Table 3](#) and then deduce the theoretical model of the research in [Figure 2](#).

Table 3: Summary of hypothesis decisions

Hypothesis	Decisions
H0 : "the more the intermediary encourages coepetitors to compete rather than cooperate, the more opportunistic they will be".	Partially Confirmed
H1: "the intermediary reduces the opportunism of coepetitors."	Invalidated
H2: "the more the intermediary encourages coepetitors to trust each other, the less opportunistic they will be".	Invalidated
H3: "the more the intermediary maintains a good reputation among the coepetitors, the less opportunistic they will be".	Invalidated
H4: "the intermediary who sanctions coepetitors reduces their opportunism."	Invalidated
H5: "Unfair and inequitable intermediaries encourage opportunism among coepetitors"	Confirmed
H6: "the more the intermediary favours the increase in coepetitors' revenues, the more opportunistic they will be."	Partially Confirmed



+

Figure 2: Theoretical model of the intermediary faced with opportunism

4.2. Discussion of the results

We discuss the results by retaining the broad outlines of model (F1) of the opportunism of clandos and model (F2) of the impact of the intermediary on this opportunism.

4.2.1. The opportunism of coepetitors with intermediaries can be explained

- Whether the intermediary paradoxically balances coepetition or unbalances it in favour of competition. Our result contradicts [Jaouen et al \(2005\)](#) and [Hiesse et al \(2009\)](#) who show that working in cooperation with peers is better than competing with peers. It also disagrees with [Gundolf et al \(2006\)](#), [Tellier \(2006\)](#), [Loubaresse and Pestre \(2012\)](#) who think that the intermediary makes it possible to reconcile and get people to cooperate. It also disagrees with [Obstfeld \(2005\)](#) and [Seliverstova et al. \(2016\)](#) who respectively argue that the intermediary brings actors together and indirectly strengthens the ties between participants. However, our result is in line with [Salvetat and Géraudel \(2011\)](#), [Chen \(2008\)](#), [Clarke-Hill et al. \(2003\)](#), and [Bengtsson and Kock \(2000\)](#) who believe that competition and cooperation must be simultaneously balanced or reconciled, managed and regulated. He is in line with [Rappoport and Chammah \(1965\)](#); with [Williamson \(1975\)](#), who believes that opportunism in competition hampers cooperation; and with [Orléan \(1994\)](#), who shows that coepetitors compete more than they cooperate, and that competing players prefer confrontation to cooperation.

- Whether the intermediary paradoxically encourages stowaways to trust or distrust. (A) Our result disagrees with [Lecocq \(2003\)](#), [McEvily and Zaheer \(2004\)](#), [Geindre \(2005\)](#), [Bornarel \(2007\)](#), [Hiesse et al. \(2009\)](#), [Salvetat and Géraudel \(2011\)](#), [Assens \(2013\)](#) and [Seliverstova et al. \(2016\)](#), who believe that an intermediary fosters trust that leads to renunciation or reduces opportunism. Our result is in line with [John, \(1984\)](#) and [Nogatchewsky and Donada \(2007\)](#) who respectively stress that trust underlies the determinant of opportunism and that it carries the roots of opportunism within itself. This result is in agreement with [Aissaoui et al. \(2017\)](#) who admit the vulnerability of trust to opportunism; with [Mayer et al. \(1995\)](#) who note that trust allows the acceptance of the risk of opportunism. Our result is in line with [Ngidjima \(2017\)](#) who suggests that relationships marked by distrust would paradoxically increase opportunistic behaviour by other partners. It is in line with [Assens \(2013\)](#) who points out that in a reticular network, the repetition of exchanges transforms a relationship initially based on mistrust into a relationship based on trust. We obtain that trust and mistrust play the same role on the opportunism of coepetitors.

- Whether the intermediary paradoxically maintains the good reputation of the clandos or the bad reputation. Our result contradicts [Rubin \(1990\)](#), [Kreps \(1990\)](#) and [Wicks et al. \(1999\)](#), who emphasise that positive and consistent attitudes, i.e. a good reputation, lead to trustworthy and therefore non-

opportunistic behaviour. On the other hand, he agrees with [Rubin \(1990\)](#), [Kreps \(1990\)](#), [Wicks et al. \(1999\)](#), [Aissaoui et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Luo et al. \(2018\)](#) who believe that negative and inconsistent attitudes, and therefore a poor reputation, lead to opportunistic behaviour. Opportunism also worsens reputation. This shows that reputation and opportunism are in a reciprocal relationship. Moreover, reputation plays an ambivalent role in the opportunism of competitors.

- Whether the intermediary paradoxically raises the awareness of cheating stowaways or whether he paradoxically sanctions cheating stowaways or whether he leaves things alone (permissive): (C) Our result is in agreement with [Boyle \(1994\)](#), for the role of the facilitating broker who shares information between the members of the network and therefore raises awareness; with [Soumaya and Rabeau \(2012\)](#) and [Luo et al. \(2018\)](#), who respectively emphasise that there are preventive and punitive measures for opportunistic behaviour, that opportunists must be ejected, and that exclusion of the partner is a credible potential sanction. This result is also in line with [Noon and Delbridge \(1993\)](#), [Zaoual \(2015\)](#) and [Noireaux and Poirel \(2014\)](#) for whom opportunistic behaviour is difficult to punish; with [Brousseau \(1995\)](#) who argues that the contract is a permissive condition for cooperation between agents deemed opportunistic but it is not unique according to [Holmstrom \(1985\)](#), there is among others, intermediation.

- Whether the intermediary paradoxically allows revenues to fall or whether he allows the clandestine trader's revenues to remain at the same level (Or) whether he favours an increase in the clandestine trader's revenues. Our result is ambivalent (agreement/disagreement) with that of [Hiesse et al \(2009\)](#), who consider that the facilitating broker ensures that the value provided by the actors does not decrease. 27% of the clandos believe that the existence of the intermediary enables them to increase their income, compared with 40% who believe that their income is at the same level and 30% that it has decreased. What's more, 67% of illegals believe that eliminating the middleman will enable them to increase their revenue. (B) Our result disagrees with [Rojot \(2003\)](#), who notes that fair treatment by the intermediary leads to performance, but according to [Benjelloun and Balambo \(2016\)](#), it is underperformance that determines opportunism. Our result is in line with [Assassi](#). We therefore find that revenue performance is ambivalent in explaining the opportunism of competitors.

4.2.2. The impact of the intermediary on the opportunism of competitors

The intermediary has an impact on the opportunistic behaviour of the competitors if he encourages them to distrust each other or, paradoxically, encourages them to trust each other (discussion A above) and paradoxically favours an increase in the clandos' revenue (discussion B above); or if he paradoxically intervenes in the sanctioning process (discussion C above).

4.3. Managerial and theoretical contributions

The contributions of this work are methodological, theoretical and managerial. For once, we have used the mvQCA method in strategy research. This has shown its value in terms of intermediate results.

As a managerial contribution, we propose that any state or private regulatory body that represents an intermediary in a business relationship should establish a dialogue to arouse the trust of the coopeititors by applying sanctions fairly, equitably and impartially. The intermediary must be periodically assessed by his peers on his practices to correct any deviations. They must have horizontal relations with their coopeititors. He must be as unobtrusive as possible, but effective. Its presence must be perceived as an "invisible hand".

The role of an intermediary, which is supposed to guarantee fair and equitable regulation of competition, shows that it is paradoxically responsible for the opportunistic behaviour of the players. Based on our models, we therefore theoretically propose that theories of justice and fairness can incorporate a non-ethical dimension of actors to counteract the opportunistic practices of an intermediary. We confirm Rawls' veil of ignorance that the intermediary must use to regulate competition in order to avoid its opportunistic behaviour.

5. CONCLUSION

At the end of this research, which attempted to show the impact of an intermediary on opportunistic behaviour in a coopeitition strategy, we asked ourselves "what is the impact of an intermediary on the opportunism of players in a coopeitition between very small firms? We used the theory of justice (procedural and interactional) and fairness to explain the intermediary's position and its influence on opportunistic behaviour in coopeitition between clandos. In addition, we used a review of the literature showing that an intermediary tends to attenuate or suppress the opportunistic behaviour of cooperativists because it is deviant from cooperative behaviour. We defined the notion of opportunism, presented opportunism in coopeitition, the elements that oppose opportunism, trust, reputation and sanction. Our methodological anchoring is mixed, quali-quantitative based on the technique of comparative qualitative analysis in its mvQCA version. The data used are primary, collected from a questionnaire administered to 33 clandos in coopeitition with an intermediary and 15 clandos in coopeitition without an intermediary, in the suburban transport sector. These clandos were approached in situ and operate in 5 sites in the Owendo commune of Gabon. One of the five sites houses a coopeitition without intermediaries. This enabled us to verify and triangulate our results. The main results are two formulae, the first explains the opportunistic behaviour of the coopeititors and its explanatory conditions and the second gives the impact of the intermediary on this opportunistic behaviour. The results indicate that the opportunistic behaviour of coopeititors is explained by five combinations of reasons, namely: 1)- the good reputation of the players, the decrease in their revenues, the advice or sanctions of the intermediary to the cheating players, a balanced coopeitition between cooperation and competition; 2)- the sanctions of the cheating players in a coopeitition favouring more competition; 3)- permissiveness or slackness in the working environment and coopeititors with a bad reputation; 4)- balanced coopeitition between cooperation and competition, keeping revenues at the

same level and mutual trust between coopetitors; 5)- good reputation of the players, increase of the players' revenues and mistrust between coopetitors. The intermediary has an impact by encouraging opportunistic behaviour on the part of the coopetitors, by encouraging them to distrust or trust each other, by encouraging an increase in the players' revenues, and by gradually penalising coopetitors who cheat, starting by raising awareness and then by reproaching them before penalising them.

We find that opportunistic behaviour enables coopetitors to protect themselves from partners who might intend to cheat, cheat or conceal vicious behaviour. They also enable coopetitors to protect themselves from unfair and inequitable practices on the part of the intermediary. The literature shows that opportunism is deviant behaviour that must be corrected at all costs. However, our results tell us, among other things, about the determinants that need to be addressed in order to correct this behaviour. We therefore conclude that although opportunistic behaviour is deviant and therefore unhealthy for business relationships, in our case it is perceived as a reaction and protection strategy for the coopetitors (clandos) against the injustice and unfairness of the intermediary. It can therefore be paradoxically beneficial.

The main limitation of the research is methodological. It is based on a mixed quali-quantitative method using the QCA technique in its mvQCA version. The formulas obtained are certainly rich in information on the opportunism of the clandos, but they do not give us their respective importance. It would therefore be wise to carry out a purely quantitative study using multivariate regression to really see the impact of each of the variables used, and therefore its importance on opportunistic behaviour. Another approach would be to explore other sectors in order to generalise the results.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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