COOPETITION FOR SUCCESS: INSIGHTS FROM MALAYSIA'S WOODWORKING INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the practices of strategic alliances (SA) within the Malaysian woodworking sector, focusing on how these practices function and contribute to the industry. Through a qualitative approach, the study explores whether woodworking firms collaborate to define SA practices and the role of coopetition in such alliances. Findings from interviews with industry participants highlight the practical application of coopetition, where firms simultaneously collaborate and compete. The concept of coopetition applied within the sector includes resource pooling, market-sharing strategies, and collective problem-solving, alongside the inherent challenges of managing competitive tensions. These insights provide a framework for industry practitioners to optimize strategic alliances, emphasizing the importance of transparency, trust, and alignment of mutual goals in fostering a sustainable coopetitive environment. The research offers valuable perspectives that may guide other sectors in exploring coopetition for competitive advantage.

Keywords: Strategic Alliances, Coopetition, Woodworking.

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected global economy, firms are increasingly recognizing the value of strategic alliances as a means to enhance competitiveness and drive innovation. One emerging concept within this realm is coopetition, a blend of cooperation and competition, where businesses collaborate on certain activities while maintaining competition in other areas. This strategic duality allows firms to pool resources, reduce costs, and jointly solve problems while still preserving their independent market positions (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Gnyawali & Park, 2011).

The Malaysian woodworking industry provides a compelling context to explore the dynamics of coopetition. As one of the major contributors to Malaysia's export economy, particularly in the global timber and furniture markets, the woodworking sector faces a multitude of challenges. These include raw material scarcity, labor shortages, and heightened competition on both domestic and international fronts (Bernama, 2022). In light of these pressures, firms within the sector are increasingly adopting coopetitive strategies to remain viable and competitive.

Despite the growing adoption of coopetition, existing literature on this strategy within the Malaysian woodworking industry remains limited. While coopetition has been extensively studied in other industries, its application in this specific context is still under-researched. Furthermore, past studies tend to focus predominantly on the benefits, such as innovation and market expansion, while neglecting the challenges of managing the tension between cooperation and competition (Crick, 2020; Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, 2009).

Therefore, this study seeks to fill the knowledge gap by providing a deeper understanding of strategic alliances and coopetition within Malaysia’s woodworking sector. It would be beneficial to investigate the ways in which competing woodworking sectors might enhance their organisational performance, or to be creative by implementing a coopetition strategy in Malaysia in light of the current market setting.

Citation Information: Sahlan, K., M. (2025). Coopetition for success: insights from Malaysia's woodworking industry. *Academy of Strategic Management Journal, 24*(1), 1-12.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the coopetition dynamics in Malaysia's woodworking industry. By examining the experiences and perspectives of industry players, the research seeks to uncover the complexities of managing coopetitive relationships, on how firms navigate the tension between collaboration and competition, particularly in industries characterized by fluctuating resource availability and evolving market dynamics. The findings offer practical strategies for industry players to improve their alliances, emphasizing the importance of trust and shared goals. These insights can also be applied to other industries facing similar challenges.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

a) What are the practices of SA in woodworking sector? How do SA practices work in these woodworking sectors?
b) Have woodworking sectors collaborate to determine SA practices? What concept of coopetition is applied?

Scope of the Study

Specifically, the study is centred on the woodworking sector in the states of Negeri Sembilan and Johor in Malaysia. These are the states in which SA have been observed among various companies in the industry. The scope of the study is restricted to qualitative analysis, which is based on interviews with important stakeholders, such as business owners and managers, in order to get insights into their experiences and tactics in relation to SA practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Woodworking Industry in Malaysia

The Malaysian woodworking industry has long been a cornerstone of the country's economy, contributing significantly to both domestic and international markets. Over the past few decades, Malaysia has established itself as one of the world's leading exporters of wood products, including sawn timber, plywood, and furniture (Mida, 2023). The industry's growth has been driven by the abundance of natural resources, a skilled labor force, and government support through various policies and incentives.

However, the industry has faced numerous challenges, particularly in recent years. These include fluctuations in the availability of raw materials, increasing production costs, labor shortages, and competition from other countries with lower production costs (Malaysian Timber Industry Board Aims to Hit RM28b worth of Timber Exports by 2025, 2022). In response to these challenges, firms within the industry have sought innovative strategies to maintain their competitiveness, with coopetition emerging as a viable approach.

Overview of Coopetition

Coopetition is defined as the simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and competition by firms that engage in a strategic relationship. This concept, first introduced by Nalebuff & Brandenburger (1996), suggests that firms can benefit from collaborating with their competitors in areas where they share common interests while continuing to compete in other

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areas. The core idea behind coopetition is that by working together, firms can create greater value than they could achieve independently (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000).

The application of coopetition has been studied across various industries, including technology, healthcare, and manufacturing (Gnyawali & Park, 2011; Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, 2009). In the context of the woodworking industry, coopetition can enable firms to share resources, reduce costs, and innovate more effectively. However, managing the inherent tensions between cooperation and competition is critical to the success of such strategies.

Theoretical Foundations of Coopetition

The theoretical foundation of coopetition is grounded in several key theories, including game theory, resource-based view (RBV), and social exchange theory. Game theory provides a framework for understanding the strategic interactions between firms, particularly in scenarios where cooperation can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes (Nalebuff & Brandenburger, 1996). The RBV suggests that firms can gain a competitive advantage by pooling their resources and capabilities, which are often scarce and difficult to replicate (Peng, 2001).

Social exchange theory, on the other hand, focuses on the relational aspects of coopetition, emphasizing the importance of trust, reciprocity, and long-term relationships (Cook et al., 2013). These theories collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the motivations and mechanisms that drive firms to engage in coopetition.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, a conceptual framework is proposed to guide the empirical analysis of coopetition in the Malaysian woodworking industry (Figure 1). The framework integrates the key points between cooperation and competition as discussed in the literature, providing a comprehensive model for understanding the dynamics of coopetition in this context.

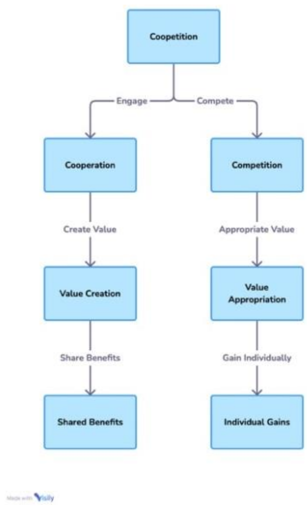

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK BY AUTHOR

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METHODLGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring the experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in coopetition within the woodworking industry. A case study approach was selected to focus on the specific context of Malaysia's woodworking industry, allowing for a detailed examination of the challenges, advantages, and strategies associated with coopetition (Yin, 2009).

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Nine participants, who were either owners or managers of woodworking companies in Negeri Sembilan and Johor, were interviewed. The interviews were designed to gather insights into the participants' experiences with coopetition. Each interview lasted between 10 to 45 minutes and was recorded with permission (Rubin & Rubin, 2011)

Document Analysis: Relevant documents, including company reports and meeting minutes, were reviewed to provide context and support the findings from the interviews (Bowen, 2009).

Observations: On-site observations were conducted to understand how coopetition strategies are implemented in practice, offering additional insights into the real-world application of the strategies discussed in the interviews (Angrosino, 2007).

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had significant experience with coopetition in the woodworking industry. This method ensured that the data collected was relevant and rich in detail (Patton, 2014). The study focused on two key regions, Negeri Sembilan and Johor, where the woodworking industry is well-established.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a structured process of coding the data and grouping similar codes into broader themes that addressed the research questions.

Initial coding was performed using Microsoft Word, with codes subsequently grouped into themes corresponding to our research questions. To ensure reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of the data, with discrepancies resolved through discussion.

Findings

The study revealed several key themes related to the practices of SA in the woodworking sector and the collaborating practices applied. The findings also corresponds each of the research question that came out from interview sessions with nine participants.

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Profile of the Participants

Nine cognitive visit interviews, both in-person and online, took place between 2023 and 2024 over the course of a year. Even though it was a wonderful experience, scheduling meetings with the two owners and seven managers was difficult. The methods of communication used to determine which possible managers or owners would be ready to operate within the time limits imposed by the researcher were phone calls and WhatsApp messaging.

The woodworking industry generated the key informants who were chosen. They were specifically chosen from the industries in Segamat, Johor, and Gemas, Negeri Sembilan. Interviewees included eight male and one female owner or managers, providing a balanced representation of both Generation X and Generation Y. Interestingly, among individuals who accepted the initial invitation to take part in this research, the researcher had trouble finding a single owner who represented Generation Baby Boomers. The participants' educational backgrounds were widely distributed, with seven participants of the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) and the remaining individuals representing both bachelors and master's degree levels.

Practices of Strategic Alliances in the Woodworking Sector

The woodworking industry in Malaysia, particularly in the regions of Negeri Sembilan and Johor, has increasingly embraced strategic alliances as a means to navigate the complex challenges of a competitive global market. These alliances, formed between traditionally competing firms, represent a shift from purely adversarial relationships to more collaborative approaches in addressing industry-wide issues. Our study, based on in-depth interviews with nine owners and managers from various woodworking enterprises, reveals a nuanced picture of how these strategic alliances operate in practice. The findings highlight a range of collaborative practices that have emerged, each aimed at leveraging collective strengths while managing the inherent tensions of cooperation between competitors. These practices not only demonstrate the adaptive strategies of local woodworking firms but also provide insights into the evolving nature of business relationships in resource-dependent industries. This section breaks down the key practices identified in our study, as depicted in Figure 2 below, regarding the operation of strategic alliances within the distinctive atmosphere of Malaysia's woodworking industry.

FIGURE 2
SA IN THE WOODWORKING INDUSTRY

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Resource and Order Sharing:

Firms collaborate to pool resources and share large orders. This is evidenced by Participant 3 (YSTT):

"*The small and medium-sized woodworking industries cannot complete large orders, so they will cooperate with their competitors to complete them. That is, they will share an order with several bosses to complete together*."

Knowledge Sharing

Companies share certain information while retaining proprietary knowledge. Participant 3 (YSTT) explained:

"*When collaborating with competitors, it is essential to consider what information can be shared and what information cannot. For example, a woodworking company may only share 70% of the information with competitors, while maintaining 30% for themselves*."

Quality Management

Firms work together to manage product quality. Participant 4 (GFP) highlighted this challenge:

"*If there are differences in product quality among collaborating industries, customers may question the discrepancy between high-grade and low-grade products, leading to potential rejections*."

Market Collaboration

Companies cooperate on pricing strategies. Participant 2 (JP) stated:

"*Dishonest merchants often lose money due to market fluctuations. Cooperation with competitors ensures accurate pricing and avoids buyers ruining the market*."

Joint Innovation

Firms collaborate on research and development. Participant 1 (KLS) provided an example:

"*Two competitors collaborating on a research and development project. They began with a small-scale initiative to develop a new eco-friendly wood treatment process, and over time, as trust and synergy grew, they expanded their collaboration into other areas, eventually becoming leaders in sustainable woodworking practices*."

These strategic alliance practices in the Malaysian woodworking sector reveal a complex interplay of collaboration and competition. From resource sharing and joint innovation to careful knowledge management and quality control, these practices demonstrate how firms are adapting to market challenges through strategic partnerships. The success of these alliances hinges on a delicate balance of trust, communication, and mutual benefit. As evidenced by the participants' responses, these practices are not without challenges, but they represent a significant shift in how woodworking firms approach market competition and industry development. By leveraging collective strengths while maintaining individual competitiveness, these strategic alliances are reshaping the landscape of the woodworking industry in Malaysia, potentially offering a model for similar resource-dependent sectors facing global market pressures.

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The concept of coopetition applied among wood working sectors

The evidence from our interviews produce theme that woodworking sectors in Malaysia do collaborate to determine Strategic Alliance practices. This collaboration is largely driven by market demands and the need to overcome individual limitations. The concept of coopetition - simultaneous competition and cooperation - is clearly evident in these practices as shown in Figure 3.

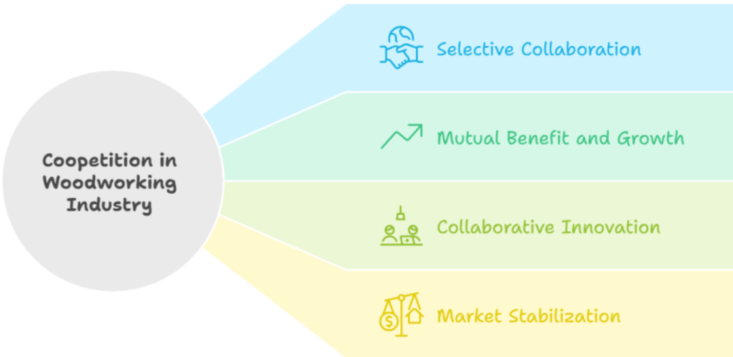

FIGURE 3
COOPETITION AMONG WOODWORKING

Concepts of Coopetition Applied

Selective Collaboration

Firms engage in coopetition by selectively sharing information and resources. This is illustrated by Participant 3 (YSTT):

"*When collaborating with competitors, it is essential to consider what information can be shared and what information cannot. For example, a woodworking company may only share 70% of the information with competitors, while maintaining 30% for themselves*."

This practice demonstrates the balance between cooperation and maintaining competitive advantage.

Mutual Benefit and Growth

The concept of coopetition is applied through practices that aim for mutual benefit. Participant 2 (JP) explained:

"*What we aim for is a win-win situation. For instance, if I meet customers or friends looking to buy pallet wood, and the neighbouring factory specializes in pallet wood products, I introduce the customers to them*."

This approach shows how firms cooperate to expand the overall market while still competing within it.

Moreover, woodworking firms collaborate to establish practices that allow them to meet market demands while maintaining individual competitiveness. This is evident in how they approach large orders and resource sharing. As Participant 3 (YSTT) stated:

"*The small and medium-sized woodworking industries cannot complete large orders, so they will cooperate with their competitors to complete them. That is, they will share an order with several bosses to complete together*."

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This practice shows how firms come together to determine collaborative approaches when faced with market opportunities that exceed individual capacities.

Collaborative Innovation

Coopetition is also evident in joint research and development efforts. Participant 1 (KLS) provided an example:

"*Two competitors collaborating on a research and development project. They began with a small-scale initiative to develop a new eco-friendly wood treatment process, and over time, as trust and synergy grew, they expanded their collaboration into other areas, eventually becoming leaders in sustainable woodworking practices*."

This practice illustrates how competitors collaborate to innovate and create new market opportunities.

Market Stabilization

Firms apply coopetition concepts in managing market dynamics. Participant 2 (JP) stated:

"*Unscrupulous merchants often lose money due to market fluctuations. Cooperation with competitors ensures accurate pricing and avoids buyers ruining the market*."

This shows how competitors cooperate to maintain market stability while still competing for customers.

The strategic alliances formed within Malaysia's woodworking sector demonstrate a nuanced application of coopetition principles. These firms have organically developed collaborative practices that allow them to compete and cooperate simultaneously, driven by market demands and shared challenges. The balance between information sharing and protection, mutual growth and individual competitiveness, and collaborative innovation while maintaining distinct market identities, all point to a sophisticated understanding of coopetition's potential benefits. As the industry continues to evolve, these coopetitive practices may well become more formalized, potentially leading to more structured strategic alliances. However, the success of these arrangements will likely continue to depend on the delicate balance of trust, transparency, and mutual benefit that has characterized their development thus far. This adaptive approach to coopetition in the woodworking sector offers valuable insights for other industries facing similar competitive pressures and resource constraints.

DISCUSSION

The findings from our study of Strategic Alliances (SA) and coopetition in Malaysia's woodworking sector offer rich insights into the evolving nature of inter-firm relationships in traditional industries facing modern challenges. This study illuminates the complex dynamics at play as firms in a historically competitive sector navigate the pressures of globalization, resource constraints, and changing market demands. The woodworking industry, with its deep roots in Malaysia's economic landscape, serves as a compelling case study for understanding how traditional sectors are adapting to the 21st-century business environment.

The emergence of strategic alliances and coopetitive relationships in this sector challenges conventional wisdom about the nature of competition in mature industries. It suggests that even in sectors where rivalry has been the norm, there is potential for collaborative innovation and mutual benefit. This shift towards more cooperative models is not merely a

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defensive strategy in the face of external threats, but rather a proactive approach to creating new opportunities and addressing shared challenges.

The findings from our study of SA and coopetition in Malaysia's woodworking sector offer rich insights into the evolving nature of inter-firm relationships in traditional industries facing modern challenges. This study explains of how competitive sectors adapt to changing market conditions through collaborative practices, while maintaining the delicate balance between cooperation and competition.

Emergence and Nature of Informal Strategic Alliances

Our research reveals that woodworking firms in Malaysia have developed a range of SA practices organically, primarily in response to market pressures and resource limitations. This aligns with Bengtsson & Kock (2014) observation that coopetition often emerges as a strategic response to industry challenges. The informal nature of these alliances, characterized by practices such as order sharing and selective knowledge exchange, suggests a pragmatic approach to cooperation that allows firms to maintain individual identities while leveraging collective strengths.

The flexibility and adaptability of these informal alliances are particularly noteworthy. Unlike formal joint ventures or contractual partnerships often seen in high-tech industries (Gnyawali & Park, 2009), the woodworking sector's approach demonstrates a more fluid form of collaboration. This fluidity may be particularly suited to industries with fluctuating demand and resource availability, allowing firms to quickly adapt their collaborative efforts to changing market conditions.

Balancing Cooperation and Competition

The coopetition concepts applied in this sector demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the potential benefits and risks of competitor collaboration. Firms engage in what Gnyawali & Park (2011) describe as "*selective revealing*," sharing some information while protecting core competitive advantages. This careful balancing act is evident in practices such as the "*70-30*" information sharing rule mentioned by participants, which aligns with Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen (2009) findings on knowledge sharing in coopetitive relationships.

This selective approach to collaboration reflects the tension inherent in coopetition, where firms must simultaneously manage cooperative and competitive forces. This capability allows firms to navigate the complex landscape of simultaneous competition and cooperation effectively.

Trust and Communication as Foundational Elements

The emphasis on trust and open communication as critical factors in successful alliances echoes findings from broader strategic alliance literature (Das & Teng, 1998). However, the study highlights how these elements are particularly crucial in the context of coopetition, where partners must navigate the inherent tension between cooperation and competition. The phased approach to building collaborative relationships, starting with smaller projects, demonstrates a practical strategy for cultivating trust in a competitive environment.

This gradual trust-building process aligns with Dyer & Singh (1998) relational view of competitive advantage, which posits that inter-firm relationships can be a source of supernormal profits. In the context of the woodworking industry, where relationships are

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often long-standing and community-based, this trust-building process may be facilitated by social and cultural factors specific to the Malaysian context.

Innovation through Collaboration

The examples of joint research and development initiatives in sustainable practices align with Bouncken & Kraus (2013) assertion that coopetition can drive innovation, particularly in SMEs. This suggests that strategic alliances in the woodworking sector are not merely defensive strategies but also proactive approaches to creating new market opportunities.

The collaborative innovation observed in this study challenges the traditional view that competition is the primary driver of innovation (Ziemnowicz, 2020). Instead, it supports more recent perspectives that emphasize the role of collaboration in fostering innovation, particularly in industries where individual firms may lack the resources to undertake significant R&D efforts alone (Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, 2009). The focus on sustainable practices in these collaborative efforts also suggests that coopetition may play a crucial role in addressing industry-wide challenges, such as environmental sustainability, that require collective action.

Market Stabilization and Collective Growth

The collaborative efforts to stabilize pricing and expand market reach reflect what Lado et al. (1997) term "*syncretic rent-seeking behavior*," where competitors cooperate to grow the overall market while still competing for market share. This approach appears to be particularly relevant in resource-constrained industries like woodworking, where individual firms may lack the capacity to significantly influence market conditions alone.

This collective approach to market management demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of game theory principles in business strategy(Nalebuff & Brandenburger, 1996). By cooperating to maintain price stability and market integrity, firms are effectively creating a more favorable competitive environment for all participants. However, this practice also raises potential antitrust concerns, highlighting the need for careful consideration of the legal and ethical implications of such collaborative practices.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the strategic alliance practices and coopetition concepts observed in Malaysia's woodworking sector demonstrate a pragmatic and evolving approach to inter-firm collaboration. These findings contribute significantly to the understanding of how traditional industries can adapt to contemporary market challenges through cooperative strategies while maintaining competitive dynamics. The study highlights the importance of trust, communication, and balanced knowledge sharing in successful coopetitive relationships, while also pointing to the potential for such relationships to drive innovation and market stability.

As industries continue to face pressures from globalization and resource constraints, the lessons from this sector may provide valuable insights for both practitioners and policymakers in fostering sustainable industry development. The adaptive and informal nature of the collaborative practices observed suggests that coopetition can emerge organically in response to industry challenges, but also indicates the potential value of more structured support for such practices. Moving forward, the challenge for firms, industry leaders, and policymakers to cultivate an environment that encourages beneficial

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collaboration while maintaining the competitive dynamics that drive innovation and efficiency.

This study opens up new avenues for exploration in the field of coopetition and strategic alliances, particularly in the context of traditional industries facing modern challenges. By deepening understand of how firms navigate the complex landscape of competition and cooperation, thus develop more effective strategies for enhancing industry competitiveness and resilience in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

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Received: 12-Nov-2024, Manuscript No. ASMJ-24-15445; **Editor assigned**: 13-Nov-2024, PreQC No. ASMJ-24-15445(PQ); **Reviewed**: 20- Nov-2024, QC No. ASMJ-24-15445; **Revised**: 23-Nov-2024, Manuscript No. ASMJ-24-15445(R); **Published**: 30-Nov-2024

Citation Information: Sahlan, K., M. (2025). Coopetition for success: insights from Malaysia's woodworking industry. *Academy of Strategic Management Journal, 24*(1), 1-12.