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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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THE ROLE OF THE CLIENT IN COOPETITION BETWEEN VERY SMALL BUSINESS (VSB)

***Pierre Daniel INDJENDJE NDALA**

Teacher and Researcher at the Superior Technology Institut (IST)

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*Corresponding author:

Pierre Daniel INDJENDJE NDALA,

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study the roles of a client, other than buyer and/or final consumer, in a cooperative activity between alternative transport VSB. Our approach is constructivist with a mixed qualitative-quantitative methodological approach. We adopt inductive reasoning. The primary data were collected from a 22-question questionnaire administered face-to-face to 335 clients at the place where the activity was based. Multivariate qualitative comparative analysis (mvQCA) was used to model these client roles. Our results indicate that the client plays the role of facilitator, communicator or mediator. The managerial implications are to take into account these three active roles played by the client, other than his usual roles, to broaden marketing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

A client is a natural or legal person who purchases a product or service from a company in exchange for payment¹. The main role played by the client is that of buyer and/or final consumer of a product or service. They are stakeholders in an often competitive market. They may be intermediaries if they are not end clients. We focus on the client in the service sector specifically, alternative transport, clando. A business made up of hauliers, clients and vehicle loaders. Which also makes the client an intermediary between the other two players in this three-way relationship. Depeyre and Dumez (2007, 2010) have already called for the development of research into the strategic dimension of the client in competition. The work of Czakon *et al.* (2014) and Zaoual (2015) highlights the importance of exploring the use of intermediaries in depth, as there are still grey areas and they call for further exploratory work and the complementary analyses needed to enrich this current. More recently, Autor (2018, 2020) has studied the case of a non-institutional intermediary, the shipper, and its roles in the same sector. The client has always been studied in competitive contexts (Zari and Bourkha, 2022). Moreover, they have always played the roles of buyer and consumer. Apart from the work of Depeyre and Dumez (2007, 2010),

who studied the role of the client as architect of a cooperative market in the defence industries sector in the United States, and Gadde (2012) and OECD (2016b), we have not come across any other recent work in the literature, to our knowledge, on the roles of a client involved in a competition venture between MSEs. We position ourselves in the field of relationship marketing because it uses means of action at the individual level which are interactive and, it aims to obtain a lasting change or reinforcement in clients' attitudes, rather than triggering an immediate purchase. Our paper is particularly interested in the roles played by a client who uses alternative transport on a daily basis, and who is not just a purchaser or consumer of the service, let alone the architect or initiator of the activity. Clients are active, so don't they play other roles? In particular, we are exploring the roles of the client in a competition venture between VSEs providing a service in the transport sector, known as a clando. Fogarty (1992) defines a role as "a set of behaviours and affective reactions expected of an individual occupying a given position in a social system". In the vein of Kechidi and Talbot (2010), Depeyre and Dumez (2007, 2010), Salvetat and Géraudel (2011), and the work by Perrin (2017), we then ask the question: "what roles does a client play in a competition between VSEs?". The aim of this paper is to show that the client, a stakeholder in a cooperative activity, can play other roles, including regulator, controller, coordinator, communicator, mediator, facilitator and legitimator. In addition, this research attempts to reduce the fog that surrounds this field related to the client in a competition between VSEs and to further enrich the literature.

¹<https://www.sumup.com/fr-fr/factures/termes-comptables/client/consulté le 20 avril 2023 à 23h54>.

Our empirical case is based on clients interviewed at several driver parking sites in the alternative transport sector. It is therefore interesting to study the client and his roles in order to propose the managerial implications of this actor in business relationships. This work follows a framework consisting of the conceptual approach, the research methodology, which will be mixed (quali-quant), then the empirical study, which involves data collection, sampling and data processing, culminating in the presentation of the results and their discussion before concluding.

Conceptual Approach: We present coopetition between MSEs and the possible roles played by a client in this coopetition.

Coopetition between MPS: A Paradoxical Relationship: Coopetition has not yet received a consensual definition. The definitions we are interested in focus on the different players, and more specifically, on the level of analysis based on the VSE, in particular the sole proprietorship. Coopetition combines the competitive and cooperative postures of the players (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996). For Gnyawali et al (2008, p.386), "coopetition refers to simultaneous cooperation and competition between different individual or organisational players". As for Bengtsson and Kock (2014, p.25), coopetition is "a paradoxical relationship between two or more actors who are simultaneously involved in cooperative and competitive interactions, regardless of their horizontal or vertical dimension". Czakon et al (2019) believe that coopetition is an intentional strategy and that managers pursue coopetition in order to obtain clearly defined benefits with suitable partners. We are witnessing a shift in the field of coopetition used first in the context of large firms, then in SMEs more recently in VSEs - from dyadic coopetition (Le Roy and Fernandez, 2015) to oligo-coopetition (Le Roy et al., 2021) - more recently, from collective (network) to individual coopetition. Le Roy and Mira (2018) show that the oldest case of coopetition, is initially adopted by the VSE. Organisations adopt the strategy of coopetition depending on the need for external resources, relative position in the sector and/or the search for performance (Le Roy et al., 2009). This is the case for VSEs because their size makes them vulnerable in relation to their environment. In our context, the VSE is a sole proprietorship whose owner is the only employee, the clando. Coopetition also has negative effects, in particular the plundering of skills, opportunism on the part of competitors, vulnerability to external shocks, isolation and the tendency to lose client focus. But the negative effects of coopetition appear to be less than the positive effects (Le Roy et al., 2009).

The search for a stronger market position is a motivation for collaborating with competitors (Ritala, 2012), particularly for VSEs (Kraus et al., 2019). Klimas et al. (2021) believe that one only enters into coopetition to achieve a better market position if it is perceived as strong. Mira et al. (2017) show the value of coopetition between VSEs in four characteristics VSEs in coopetition form a community separated from other competitors by a wall; VSEs in coopetition develop a strong sense of belonging to the community; there is a hierarchy of members within the cooperative network; the wall of the cooperative community is not totally hermetic, as there are entry and exit points, as also shown by Authors (2021) on the porosity of the barrier to entry of a transport activity, the clando. As for Robert et al. (2017), the VSE must separate cooperative activities from competitive activities and co-manage cooperative activities by practising member self-selection, peer monitoring and the threat of exclusion. Coopetition between MSEs is a source of strong tensions leading to damaging conflicts (Cusin et al., 2013). Finally, proximity is a key factor in coopetition between MSEs (Mira et al., 2017, p. 255). To mitigate these tensions and avoid conflicts in coopetition, an intermediary or third party can play this role between MSEs. Hiesse et al (2009) believe that the network structure of a cooperative activity requires the presence of a third party who can facilitate coopetition between players. We retain the form of coopetition between TPEs, regulated by a third party (Hannachi and Coléno, 2012) like the activity of clando, individual enterprises (EI) which presents a notable advantage according to Gbaguidi (2016) linked to the proximity in their strategic interactions which are more human. According to Zari

and Bourkha (2022), the integration of individuals at the heart of coopetition is important for managing tensions. The more individuals are integrated into the paradoxes of coopetition, the more optimal the choice to "share" (Bez et al., 2016). We see that coopetition between VSEs is special. We are interested in the roles of the client in a service activity using coopetition.

The Client and his roles in a Coopetition: We study the roles of the client. To do this, we first define the concept of role. Kahn et al (1964) describe the organisation as a system of roles. According to the authors, the concept of role makes it possible to "link organisational and individual levels by making explicit the psychosociological processes by which organisational roles are defined" (Katz and Kahn, 1966, p. 172). Katz and Kahn (1966, pp. 173-174) define a role as "a set of expected activities or behaviours". It is these activities that constitute the role to be performed by each person in a specific position. Rocheblave-Spenlé (1969) defines a role as "an organised model of behaviour relating to a certain position of the individual in an interactional whole". The author considers that the role is constructed through interaction. We reconcile only two approaches to the concept of role, namely those which consider role at the level of the group and those which place it essentially in an intersubjective context (Rocheblave-Spenlé, 1969, p.112). We also define a client as a person who purchases or consumes products or services in return for payment. A client, in the economic sense, is the person or entity that makes the decision to purchase a good or service, either occasionally or on a regular basis, from a supplier. Concerning the roles played by a client in a coopetition, we use the literature, which is not very extensive. It is rare to find work in the literature on coopetition between VSEs, even though it presents strong theoretical challenges (Robert et al., 2017), and even less work on the roles of the client in this context. Several authors have studied the intermediary between an organisation and its clients, including Fulconis et al. (2007), OECD (2009), Hiesse (2009), Bessy and Larquier (2010), Gadde (2012), Ho and Ganesan (2013), Liu (2015) and Author (2018). Hiesse et al (2009, p.16) assimilate clients, public authorities or consultancy firms, as intermediaries. We specify that the client is not an intermediary in the common sense, as defined by the OECD (2009, p.9), Salvetat and Géraudel (2011) and Author (2018, 2020).

However, it is by assimilation, as Hiesse et al (2009, p.20-21) believe. Furthermore, Gadde and Snehota (2001) indicate that the roles assumed by the intermediary also depend on the sector of activity. For our purposes, we consider the client as an intermediary in a cooperative sector of alternative transport between individual companies, where the stakeholders in the activity are clients, shippers and clandos. The client is seen as an intermediary between the other two players. It is interesting to ask what roles the client plays in coopetition between VSEs. Could they play the various roles found in the literature, like any intermediary? In other words, facilitator, communicator, mediator, controller, coordinator and regulator in this cooperative transport sector with three stakeholders: clients, drivers and shippers. Client participation can take several forms, necessary for the proper delivery of a service (Gabriel et al., 2014). We can see from the above that the client is a stakeholder in coopetition who can be an intermediary playing certain roles. We are going to specify them with data from the field by interviewing the clients themselves, in this activity of clandos in coopetition.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We present the epistemological posture, the research methodology, the research design, the empirical approach with the data and the data processing technique.

Epistemology and Methodological Approach: Our epistemological approach is constructivist, in that we seek to use data from the field to construct a theorisation of an empirical reality linked to the client in a coopetition. This approach is justified by the subject we are tackling, which is topical and has not yet been widely explored in the literature:

Table 1. Roles of the client or similar intermediary

Roles	Sales arguments	Authors
Architect and Collaborator	Customers can be involved upstream of the service, by contributing to the definition or improvement of services, and downstream, by giving their opinion or taking responsibility for after-sales service.	Gabriel <i>et al.</i> (2014).
Initiator or Architect	the customer, being in a dominant position, can take similar steps to the intermediary player in a form of cooptation.	Hiesse <i>et al.</i> (2009)
Constructor or Architect and Investor	In a network, these two roles are justified by the fact that the customer feels the need to be transported, and invests in making this cooperative activity, the clando, exist.	Barbat <i>et al.</i> (2016)
Decision-maker and Instigator or Driver	the intermediary may represent a customer acting in his own interest. He drives the strategies in the network. He creates the conditions for cooptation, in particular by setting up the rules. For example: he initially confronts potential competing suppliers, then establishes an exclusive relationship with the chosen supplier, then the other competitors withdraw. It is essentially a customer or institution that is very involved, integrated into the cooperative relationship.	Salvetat et Géraudel (2011, p. 69, 77), Spulber (2003), Depeyre et Dumez (2007, 2010)
Legitimater	institutional clients are invested with public power.	Salvetat et Géraudel (2011, p.72)
Non-facilitator and Opportunist	"The client was playing with duality, encouraging competition and rivalry between the partners. He tried to turn the situation to his advantage. The customer was not a facilitator of management." In a cooperative activity, the customer takes advantage of the situation, and does not play the role of facilitator.	Fernandez et Le Roy (2015a, p.21), Lumineau et Quélin (2011)
Facilitator or Self-Facilitator Teacher and Negotiator	It is a neutral third party, acceptable to all members of the group, who has no decision-making power. Nowadays, organisations use the word facilitator to refer to many different roles. The facilitator also acts as a teacher, so that the group can become self-facilitators later on. The neutral third party structures group discussions towards a voluntary settlement, using collaborative negotiation techniques.	Schwarz (2002, p.7, 41), Blomgren Bingham et O'Leary (2015, p.253)
Facilitator	It guarantees confidence in a cooperative venture between very small businesses and encourages the conditions for cooperation between competing companies by establishing and guaranteeing "standard" rules for the relational game. The third-party player facilitates cooperative relationships and maintains and perpetuates the network as part of a continuous improvement process.	Geindre (2005), Miles et Snow (1992), (Zaoual, 2015, p.23)
Controller Broadcaster, Informer	It controls inter-company relations, disseminates information among partners and promotes learning within the network.	Zaoual (2015, p.5), Snow <i>et al.</i> (1992)
Transmitter	It acts as a bridge between rivals so that they can create potential partnerships. It is an intermediary in the cooperative relationship.	House (1971), Ralandison <i>et al.</i> (2018), Fernandez <i>et al.</i> (2011) et Salvétat et Géraudel, (2011)
Communicator	We'd like to make it clear that we're talking about a communicator rather than a communication. In other words, someone who communicates effectively, or who establishes communication and knows how to impose their message on the public. Someone who enjoys communicating with others. He or she must possess a number of qualities, in particular: listening skills, clarity, conciseness, friendliness, empathy and open-mindedness. It is the recipient who is the communicator because it is they who perceive and interpret what is being transmitted.	Fenn et Gameson, (1992, p.387), Pammer et Killian, (2003, p.45), Yilmaz (2006, p.34), Zartman (2008, p.165)
Negotiator and Communicator	Communicating with others accentuates the sense of kinship with them, and therefore proximity. It tends to create a certain horizontality with others, whether they are enemies or opponents, good or bad. An intermediary may espouse one of the archetypes in Kets De Vries' typology.	Kets De Vries (2006)
Mediator or Referee	NADRAC ¹ defines mediation as a process in which the parties to a discussion, with the assistance of a neutral third party, the mediator, identify the issues under discussion, develop options, consider alternatives, and strive to reach an agreement. Mediation is one of the oldest forms of dispute resolution. It leads to quicker resolutions and greater satisfaction for the participants, greater flexibility, creativity in settlements and the possibility of maintaining or enhancing relationships. But the third party does not have decision-making authority, nor the power to impose a settlement let alone decide the case, it helps the parties to reach a mutual agreement or it helps the parties to reach a voluntary, mutually agreed solution. Work on cooptation highlights the role played by a third party, as a mediator who is likely to influence cooperation. The mediator acts as a communicator, a conduit, a contact maker and a message carrier. This role is passive, with no real contribution. The mediator is subject to deontological rules, and therefore to ethics.	Moore (2003), Wall et Lynn, (1993), Wall <i>et al.</i> (2001), Carnevale et Pruitt (1992), Bingham et Chachere (1999), Denis, Martinet et Silem (2016, p.405), Geindre (2005), Orléan (1994), Pammer et Killian, (2003, pp. 58, 114), Salvétat et Géraudel (2011), Dagnino <i>et al.</i> (2007), Yilmaz (2006, p.35)
Coordinator, Controller, Facilitator, Approver, Legitimater, Peacemaker.	Salvetat and Géraudel give a complete typology of the intermediate player. Coordination is involved in implementing strategic decisions in the form of structural and organisational choices. Coordination is the management of interdependencies. A third party plays a key role in cooperative relationships because it coordinates and controls the pooling of flows, but can also manage conflicts between competitors.	Salvetat et Géraudel (2011), Porter (1986), Collin (2000, p.3), Bengtsson et Kock (2000), Burt (1992)
Controller	It ensures that the rules set by the competitors are complied with. It ensures that each party fulfils its commitments. The customer can benefit from greater control over the service delivered, saving time and money.	Hiesse <i>et al.</i> (2009, p.19 ; Salvétat et Géraudel, (2011, pp. 70, 74), Gabriel <i>et al.</i> (2014).
Regulator	The intermediary can manage conflicts between competing partners, and therefore acts as a regulator. The regulator is seen as a market arbitrator. An intermediary can play the role of joint regulator.	Hiesse <i>et al.</i> , (2009, p.19), OECD (2016a, p.3), Ralandison <i>et al.</i> (2018)

Source: Author using bibliographic data 2024

the position of the client and his role in a cooperative venture between very small firms. Our research is exploratory, using field data to obtain the perceptions of clients themselves about their own roles in a cooperative activity between MSEs in the alternative transport sector.

We opt for a reflexive view of these clients, i.e. the clients interviewed tell us what they themselves think of their own roles in this activity. This is the reflexive process according to Bocquillon and Derobertmasure (2018, p. 4), is essential to the implementation of a reflexive practice, consisting mainly of describing one's practice and

becoming aware of it, legitimising one's practice based on contextual arguments and theorising by formulating rules for one's future practice. Our methodological approach is exploratory and mixed, quali-quantitative because the problem studied reflects the need to understand and explain a little-known phenomenon, namely the roles played by a client in this new cooperative activity. Clients participate in and influence the functioning of a cooperative market between MSEs. This functioning is extracted or found in interactions and experiences. We seek to understand and explain the roles played by clients, other than buyers or consumers. The knowledge developed through this vision is based on the observation of a reality described or reported by the players themselves. We adopt an inductive logic in an attempt to theorise, from the particular, the responses of clients or from the data collected.

Research Design and data Processing Techniques: This work is based on a field study of clients in a cooperative alternative transport activity, the clando. We are seeking to answer the question "What roles does a client play in a competition between VSEs? Our research design is based on inductive reasoning, as shown in Figure 1.

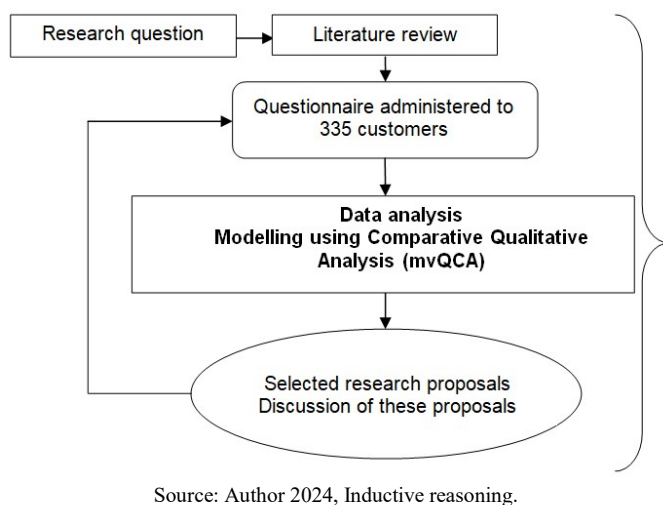


Figure 1. Inductive research design - mixed methodology

Empirical Approach: Field of Study and Data : We present the context of the study and the data collection method, and summarise the informants' responses.

Study area: The study areas are the commune of Owendo, which has 6 sites where clandos work, and the commune of Libreville, which has 21 sites. Owendo has a population of around 75,000 according to the 2016 census. Libreville, the capital of Gabon, has a population of around 600,000. These 2 communes concentrate the maximum number of clando sites. According to the Ministry of the Economy, 78% of the population uses informal transport. The field we are exploring concerns a transport activity between artisans (the clando, who is an artisan or an individual business) in competition regulated by a third party. The clando is the name given in Gabon to the alternative transport activity carried out by an individual, the craftsman, most often operating in the informal sector, with a 3rd, 4th or even 5th hand vehicle. The existence of sub-integrated districts has provided an opportunity for artisans to take up this new activity. These are craftsmen who take clients to areas where conventional taxis are not available. The reasons for the absence of these taxis are the poor state of the roads, the insecurity that reigns there, the incessant police checks, or the remoteness of these areas, which are unprofitable for conventional taxis. Clandos cooperate by forming an association to organise and sustain their business. They compete on the basis of where they park to pick up clients. A rule is applied: "the first to arrive in line at the parking area is the first to be filled by clients under the control of a third party, the shipper, who regulates the activity". The operation of the clando business can be summed up as the parking of different vehicles in order of arrival and in single file to load clients.

In an incremental process from the head of the queue to the tail, the vehicles gradually fill up (4 to 5 clients) in an average time of between 5 and 10 minutes. When all the spaces are occupied, the clando starts and the next one moves to the head of the queue to fill up, and so on. More specifically, we are studying the roles played by a client who uses this alternative mode of transport, the clando, on a daily basis. The average number of clients carried daily is 60 to 70 per vehicle. Prices vary from 100 to 300 CFA francs, depending on distance and time of day. After 9pm, prices double. Clients may offer more than the normal price, in which case "they bet". The clandos operate in a cooperative market, meaning that they compete and cooperate at the same time. They compete for clients, for revenue and for parking space, because the first to arrive is the first to be charged. What's more, it's the clando that makes the most turns that gets the highest takings. The clandos cooperate to maintain and perpetuate the activity, they cooperate on the price of the journey, and more recently, they have joined together in an association of clandos to better organise the activity. We are interested in the client as an intermediary, a stakeholder in a market of artisans in competition, clando. The primary data was collected in January 2022 on the basis of a questionnaire administered face-to-face to clients. We interviewed 335 clients at the various clandos parking sites in the communes of Libreville and Owendo, as these are the two main communes that are home to the majority of clandos in Gabon. The sample of clients was randomly selected. The following is a summary of the information gathered from clients.

Summary of responses from clients surveyed: empirical data: The data used is primary, derived from the administration of a questionnaire to 335 clients. These clients use the Clando mode of transport on a daily basis, 57% of them men and 43% women. The average age of the clients surveyed was 30. Their socio-professional category breaks down as follows: 27% students, 17% private-sector workers, 16% schoolchildren, 14% unemployed, 13% civil servants, 6% shopkeepers, 5% entrepreneurs and 3% self-employed. 39% of clients use the clandos twice a day, 17% use them 4 times a day, 16% use them 3 times a day, 10% use them 1 time a day, 8% use them 6 times a day, 7% use them 5 times a day and 5% of clients use the clandos between 7 and 10 times a day. 55% of clients surveyed said they chose a clando because of its affordable price, 46% because of its position in the car park, 46% because of the safety of this mode of transport, 43% because of the comfort of the vehicle, 40% because of the friendliness of the driver, 40% because they trusted the driver, 32% because of the condition of the vehicle, 13% because of the speed, 12% because of their friendship with the driver and 8% because of the presence of the charger. The clients questioned consider that they play the role of facilitator for 59%, controller for 58%, communicator for 49%, regulator for 46%, coordinator for 35% and mediator for 29%. For 61% of clients, this activity is cooperative, and this competition concerns parking position for 50% of them, the number of clients for 48%, working hours for 45%, and revenue for 45%.

Data Processing Techniques: (MVQCA)

We use multivariate qualitative comparative analysis (mvQCA) to process the data and model the roles played by the client in this cooperative activity between MSEs. The results of this data processing enable us to make a better contribution to defining the roles of the client, the conditions and their calibration.

Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA): QCA is a mixed approach that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches and is based on the comparison of cases. It was developed by Ragin (1987). It is based on Boolean algebra and set theory. It is increasingly used in management sciences (Garreau and Romelaer, 2019, p.260-280). We justify the use of QCA by the arguments of Depeyre and Vergne (2019) who point out that, this method is situated between qualitative methods of study which make it possible to analyse an intermediate number of cases (between 10 and 50), and that of quantitative methods which make it possible to analyse regularities on larger

samples. The starting point is qualitative, with the detailed exploration of a series of cases which are then transformed to enable an analytical comparison. QCA is increasingly applied in contexts involving a large number of cases (Thomann and Maggetti 2020). It allows for rich analyses based on its characteristics, in order to enrich our understanding of a phenomenon, including cyclical causality and the asymmetry of causes. Each configuration represents a possible causal path to explain a phenomenon. Finally, unlike the statistical method, analytical comparison does not rule out 'deviant' cases. An isolated case helps to refine our understanding of a phenomenon. The sample of cases does not have to be representative in the statistical sense. Thiem and Duşa (2013) argue that the QCA technique has become the method of choice for testing hypotheses from configurations. In our context, we use mvQCA, which is the multivariate version of QCA.

researcher must first construct a data table in which each case is assigned a value for the conditions and results (Rihoux and De Meur, 2009, p.39). We used the Tosmana 1.61 software developed by Cronqvist (2018) to model the roles played by the client, in an mvQCA formula. In the mvQCA, each category is represented by a normal number 0, 1, 2, 3. The value of a condition is represented by Condition_Name{2}, it allows multi-value states Cronqvist and Bergschlosser, 2009, p.70).

Conditions and calibration: We have selected seven conditions for modelling client roles with the mvQCA.

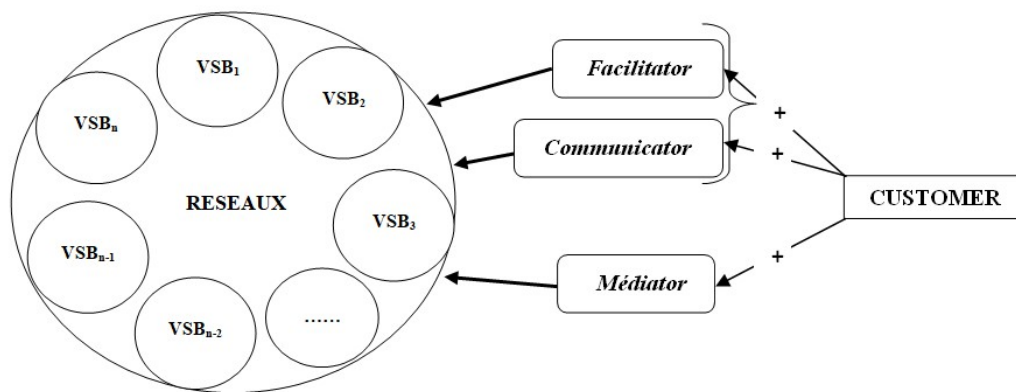
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We present the results of the formula (mvQCA) for modelling client roles using multivariate comparative qualitative analysis.

Table 2. Conditions and their operationalization

Conditions	Terms or values of conditions	
<i>PRESENCE</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : absence of the customer	<i>i</i> =1 : presence of the customer
<i>CONTROLLER</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : customer is not a controller	<i>i</i> =1 : customer is a controller
<i>COORDINATOR</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : customer is not a coordinator.	<i>i</i> =1 : customer is a coordinator
<i>COMMUNICATOR</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : customer is not a communicator.	<i>i</i> =1 : customer is a communicator
<i>FACILITATOR</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : customer is not a facilitator	<i>i</i> =1 : customer is a facilitator
<i>REGULATOR</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : customer is not a régulateur	<i>i</i> =1 : customer is a régulateur
<i>MEDIATOR</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : customer is not a médiateur	<i>i</i> =1 : customer is a médiateur
<i>ALLIANCE</i> _{i}	<i>i</i> =0 : competition	<i>i</i> =1 : cooperation
		<i>i</i> =2 : coopetition

Source: Author 2024



Source: Author 2024

Figure 2. Theoretical model of the roles of the client in a coopetition between VSBs

The mvQCA is able to capture the specific causal role of each category of multiple value conditions in order to account for more subtle groupings. This provides an important advantage over other versions of QCA as the mvQCA technique avoids crude dichotomisation and better captures the richness of information in the raw data. It analyses ordinal conditions. The mvQCA is rarely used in scientific work. This is an opportunity to make the case for it. Schneider and Wagemann (2012) devote five of the eight pages of their article to mvQCA. We cite four references to draw inspiration from the mvQCA technique which are Cronqvist (2016, 2003), Haesebrouck (2016), Thiem and Duşa (2013, p.82-90) and Rihoux and Ragin (2009, p.69-85). The number of cases required for good mvQCA processing is given by the formula for the number of rows of the truth table which will induce the formal expressions for the number of logically possible combinations: $N=2k^2 * 3k^3 * ... * n^{kn}$ where k_i = the number of conditions and n = the number of modalities. In this research, we have 7 binary conditions corresponding to 6 possible roles played by the client and a ternary condition for the type of alliance in this activity: $2631=192$ cases. A minimum of 192 clients is therefore required for the mvQCA to process the data correctly. In our case, we solicited 335 clients, which is more than enough. The technique proceeds in 3 steps, the selection of empirical cases and explanatory conditions, then the calibration of the data finally the analysis and interpretation of the results (Garreau and Romelaer, 2019). The main analytical steps in the mvQCA process are similar to the main steps in other variants of QCA (Herrmann and Cronqvist, 2009, p.35-38; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012, p.258). The

Modelling Client roles using Comparative Qualitative Analysis

The formula obtained with the Tosmana 1.6.1 software is as follows:

- $CONTROLLER\{0\} * COMMUNICATOR\{1\} * ALLIANCE\{2\} + [CONTROLLER\{0\} +$
- $COORDINATOR\{0\}] * MEDIATOR\{1\} * ALLIANCE\{2\} + COORDINATOR\{0\} *$
- $COMMUNICATOR\{1\} * FACILITATOR\{1\} * ALLIANCE\{2\} + CONTROLLER\{1\} *$
- $COORDINATOR\{1\} * REGULATOR\{1\} * FACILITATOR\{1\} * ALLIANCE\{0\} \rightarrow$
- $PRESENCE\{1\}$

This formula indicates that, in a coocompetitive activity, the client is exclusively a communicator or exclusively a mediator, or is simultaneously a communicator and a facilitator. From this mvQCA formula, we derive the following research proposals:

- P1:** "the client plays exclusively the role of communicator in a coopetition between VSBs".
- P2:** "the client plays the simultaneous roles of communicator and facilitator in a coopetition between VSBs".
- P3:** "the client plays exclusively the role of mediator in a coopetition between VSBs".

From the preceding research proposals, we arrive at the inductive theorisation represented by the theoretical model in Figure 2.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

We discuss the results of this research, which are the research proposals previously set out in P1, P2 and P3. The client plays the role of facilitator in a coopetition between individual companies, as opposed to a client in an inter-organisational coopetition. He facilitates the operation of the activity at the stowaway parking area by respecting the order in which the stowaways arrive and the order in which the parked vehicles are filled, giving priority to filling the stowaways at the head of the queue without creating conflicts. He necessarily encourages the existence of the business and its continuity, because this mode of transport is an important need for him. Indeed, without the client, it is difficult for the business to run and flourish. This role is in line with Schwarz (2002, p.371) but in opposition to Fernandez and Le Roy (2015a, p.21) who do not consider the client as a facilitator in a coopetition between organisations. We agree with Schwarz (2002, p.41) because the client is neutral and has no decision-making power. We agree with Zaoual (2015, p.1, 20) because the client challenges established positions (e.g. monopoly), and climbs into the clando of his choice without any preference while respecting the position set by the main rule of the activity.

In addition, we compare the results of this research with the literature. It emerges that the roles played by a client in an inter-organisational coopetition are not comparable, except for the role of facilitator which is opposed in the two contexts, individual enterprise and inter-organisational, as shown in Table 2 (columns 2 and 3). We note that a non-institutional intermediary (the clando loader) and the client do not play the same roles in a coopetition venture between MSEs. The client does not play the role of coordinator or controller. The roles shared by the shipper and the client are facilitator and mediator, but these two roles do not have the same objectives in the field. The shared role of facilitator does not have the same objectives. The client does not make the decisions; he helps the shipper and the stowaways by respecting the order in which the vehicles are lined up. The shipper is in charge, and maintains order by enforcing the lining-up rule and penalising indelicate stowaways where necessary. He helps clients and stowaways. As for the role of mediator played by the client, it is different from that of the shipper because the client is a third party with no decision-making authority, nor the power to impose a settlement, let alone decide the case. He helps the parties to reach a mutual agreement (Moore, 2003) or helps the parties to reach a voluntary, mutually agreed solution (Pammer and Killian, 2003, p.114). The shipper holds the power of decision; he is more of an arbitrator.

Table 3. Comparison of roles between shipper and client

Literature	Customer roles in inter-organisational coopetition	Results of the research
Role of a non-institutional intermediary (shipper) in coopetition between VSEs	Customer roles in inter-organisational coopetition	The role of the customer in coopetition between VSBs
Facilitator, Schwarz (2002), Author (2018)	Non Facilitator, Fernandez et Le Roy (2015a)	Facilitator
Mediator, Kets De Vries (2006), Author (2018)		Médiator
		Communicator
Coordinator, Kets De Vries (2006), Author (2018)	Architect, Initiator or Instigator, Spulber (2003), Depeyre et Dumez (2007, 2010) Barbat <i>et al.</i> (2016)	
Controller, Author (2018)	Investor, Barbat <i>et al.</i> (2016)	
	Decision-maker, Spulber (2003) Salvétat et Géraudel (2011)	
	Legitimater, Salvétat et Géraudel (2011)	

Source: Author 2024

The client plays the role of communicator, exchanging information with the clandos, the shipper and other clients. He communicates a great deal with the other stakeholders in the coopetition venture in order to keep himself informed or to inform others if necessary. Communication is used to develop informal relationships between stakeholders. Individuals need to meet and get to know each other. The place where the clandos are parked is also a place for socialising. The result on the client's role as communicator is in line with the archetypes in Kets De Vries' typology (2006), with Yilmaz (2006, p.34) and with Zartman (2008, p.165). However, the client does not play the role of communicator in inter-organisational coopetition. The client plays the role of mediator in coopetition between individual firms, unlike in the case of inter-organisational coopetition. In fact, he plays this role when he is at the centre of a fierce competition between two or more clandos who are looking to snatch him away. By deciding and choosing a given clando, and by respecting the position of the car park, the client arbitrates and calms rivalry. Clients develop shared beliefs, explicit or implicit values and common objectives to facilitate coordination (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1986, p.385). They impose themselves and have a significant effect on the way the activity operates and progresses. Alternatively, the client can resolve conflicts between clandos without imposing sanctions, as he does not have this power. Our result is in line with authors such as Pammer and Killian (2003, p.58), Salvétat et Géraudel (2011), Fernandez *et al.* (2011) and Ralandison *et al.* (2018) but opposes Fernandez and Le Roy (2015a, p.21) who consider the client as a source of conflict. The results of this research on the roles played by the client in a cooperative activity between individual companies can be compared with those of the Author (2018) who studied the roles of the clandos' shipper (non-institutional intermediary) in the same activity. These two actors, client and shipper, are stakeholders in this cooperative activity (clando). The shipper plays four roles: facilitator, mediator, coordinator and controller, while the client plays three roles: facilitator, communicator and mediator. The two actors share the roles of facilitator and mediator as shown in Table 2 (columns 1 and 3). In

CONCLUSION

At the end of this research, we have studied the roles of clients in a coopetition between individual companies. We have shown that the business is indeed a theatre for the coopetition relationship. We are attempting to answer the question: "What roles does a client play in coopetition between VSEs? We have adopted a constructivist stance and inductive reasoning. We used a review of the literature on coopetition and the possible roles of a client. Primary data was collected by means of a questionnaire from 335 clients who use the clando mode of transport on a daily basis, and we modelled the roles of the client using a multi-variate comparative qualitative analysis, the mvQCA. The main results are : The client plays exclusively the role of communicator or mediator. They also play the simultaneous roles of facilitator and communicator. Theoretical and managerial contributions can be drawn from these results. The theoretical contribution of this paper is linked to the theorised model of the roles of the client in a coopetition between MSEs. Indeed, our results complete the roles of a client other than buyer and/or final consumer of a product or a service. In a cooperative service market, they can play other roles, in particular as facilitators, communicators and mediators. These results can be integrated and taken into account in relational or operational marketing theory, which now places the client in a more active and participative position. As a managerial contribution, this study enables managers and strategy and marketing practitioners to consider the client of a cooperative activity, increasingly, as an active player who can play roles other than that of buyer or final consumer of services or products. They can help an activity to function, in particular by calming rivalries and conflicts, sustaining the activity, establishing communication, 'horizontalising' vertical relationships between stakeholders, and facilitating compliance with market rules rather than imposing them, as this role is devolved to a stakeholder such as the shipper in our context. We suggest that marketing researchers and theorists take these client roles

into account in order to refine marketing theories and propose new client strategies. There is one limitation to this research. It concerns the generalisability of our results: we studied only one sector, that of informal alternative transport, particularly claudos. There is room for improvement in the generalisability of our results. As a prospect, we propose to replicate this research in other sectors where coopetition reigns and in several other contexts. Indeed, comparisons could be envisaged by studying companies belonging to other sectors (Parasuraman et al., 1988), in order to de-contextualise (Eisenhardt, 1991, p.626) the phenomenon and extend the results. This would allow our model to be tested and our results to be generalised.

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