

Katarzyna Czernek-Marszałek

University of Economics in Katowice

ORCID: 0000-0002-9889-9821

Patrycja Juszczyk

University of Economics in Katowice

ORCID: 0000-0003-2231-5719

Dagmara Wójcik

University of Economics in Katowice

ORCID: 0000-0002-9082-8471

Patrycja Klimas

Wrocław University of Economics and Business

ORCID: 0000-0002-3912-7389

Interorganizational cooperation amid uncertainty: the creative industries' perspective¹

ABSTRACT

Uncertainty is not a novel issue in strategic management, hence one may notice that the modern world is becoming increasingly volatile and unpredictable. The literature points out that uncertainty and crises situations change not only the business environment and business implementation, but the effects of uncertainty also have an impact on interorganizational cooperation. This article focuses on exploring the significance of uncertainty stemming from a large-scale emergency situation (i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic) for the course of interorganizational cooperation (IC). The research was conducted in Poland within a group of 30 interviewees (in total 5 virtual FGIs) representing four creative industries. Our research shows that in conditions of uncertainty, interorganizational cooperation in creative industries still existed. However, very often cooperation had a completely

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different form, because three main elements changed: (1) IC partners, (2) opportunities to build social relationships underlying the establishment of IC, and (3) motives and goals of undertaking cooperation.

Keywords: interorganizational cooperation, uncertainty, creative industries

JEL Classification: D810, L220, L240, P130, P460

Introduction

In the current landscape of strategic management, one prominent research focus centres on interorganizational cooperation (IC) [Klimas, Radomska, 2022; Zakrzewska-Bielawska et al., 2023]. The theoretical foundation of IC primarily aligns with the relational perspective on company advantage [Dyer, Singh, 1998]. In practice, IC manifests in various forms, including dyads (involving two partners), triads (involving three partners), networks (comprising more than three partners), and ecosystems [Klimas, Czakon, 2022]. At a strategic level, interorganizational cooperation is observed in the adoption of relational strategies that are exclusively geared toward IC and intensive exploitation of interorganizational relationships [Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2023], or open strategies that embrace a more flexible and emergent approach to utilizing interorganizational relationships in an inclusive and transparent manner [Klimas, Radomska, 2022].

Remarkably, although IC was initially examined in the context of high-technology industries, knowledge-intensive sectors, and highly dynamic or even hyperdynamic business environments [Klimas, Czakon, 2022], it has now expanded its research scope to encompass public institutions [Nohrstedt et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2022] as well as creative and cultural industries [Jackson, Tomlinson, 2009; Juszczak, 2021; Klimas, Czakon, 2022; Wójcik, 2022].

Uncertainty is not a novel issue in strategic management [Wernerfelt, Karnami, 1987], hence one may notice that the modern world is becoming increasingly volatile and unpredictable, consequently, the surrounding uncertainty is on the rise. Uncertainty is considered as one of the key properties of crises [Nohrstedt et al., 2018, p. 257]. Some of the crises – due to their scope, meaning, global reach, and totally non-expected appearance – are labelled as large-scale emergencies [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020].

It is widely acknowledged that many modern crises, including pandemics, climate change, terrorism, and economic turmoil, have global ramifications. However, what receives less attention is the organizational-level impact of these crises. A prime example of this is the cross-industry and international collaboration among various healthcare stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is argued that the intense and multidimensional cooperation involving local and national authorities, insurance companies, hospitals, universities,

research institutes, laboratories, and pharmaceutical companies expedited the development and global deployment of COVID vaccines [Deters, Zardo, 2023; Turner et al., 2022; Vanhuyse et al., 2021].

In the realm of business, IC emerges as a critical means to address effectively these typically adverse implications [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020; McCutcheon, Stuart, 2000; McGahan, 2021; Zafari et al., 2020]. Some even argue that during crises, cooperation should be harnessed through diverse relationships with various partners in various forms, leading to the phenomenon of overlapping networks [Nohrstedt et al., 2018]. Moreover, as highlighted by Castañer and Oliveira [2020], greater environmental uncertainty potentially opens up greater opportunities to generate relational rents through interorganizational cooperation by mitigating uncertainty in the operational environment. This is because IC is recognized for its role in reducing uncertainty about partners and their current as well as future behaviours [Latusek, Vlaar, 2018]. Indeed, in the context of massive global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, even collaborating with competitors is seen as a means of survival or a way to safeguard the market or the entire industry [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020].

Summing up, the literature points out that uncertainty and crises situations change the business environment and business implementation. The effects of uncertainty also have an impact on interorganizational cooperation [Castañer, Oliveira; 2020; Turner et al., 2022; Vanhuyse et al., 2021]. Nonetheless, as shown by the literature review carried out by Nohrstedt and colleagues [2018], the research on IC in the context of crisis and uncertainty is scarce, even though cooperation might help to respond to the crisis, including large-scale emergencies in particular [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020]. Thus, the aim of the paper is to explore the significance of uncertainty stemming from a large-scale emergency situation (i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic) for the course of interorganizational cooperation.

To achieve this aim, the findings from the exploratory qualitative research in the form of focus group interviews (FGIs) were used. The research was conducted in Poland in June 2021 within a group of 30 interviewees (in total 5 online FGIs) representing four creative industries, namely computer and video games, museums, performing arts, and tourist culinary routes.

In the subsequent sections of the paper, we outline the theoretical background for considerations regarding interorganizational cooperation, adopting a perspective centred on uncertainty and its significance within creative industries. We present the methodological assumptions of the conducted qualitative research, provide insights from the focus group interviews run in four creative industries, showcase the research findings in the context of existing knowledge, and highlight the main limitations and potential directions for further research.

Theoretical background

Interorganizational cooperation in conditions of uncertainty – premises for starting and developing cooperation

In general, it is emphasized that the need for interorganizational cooperation usually arises when existing organizations are unable to provide independently a specific service, deliver specific products, or meet specific needs of recipients [Vangen, Huxham, 2005]. These premises are particularly important in conditions of uncertainty, crises, and environmental threats. Uncertainty understood as “events that threaten core values, require immediate action, and must be managed under conditions of uncertainty” [Nohrstedt et al., 2018, p. 257] is a state when the results of decisions cannot be predicted with absolute accuracy and all possibilities and related probabilities are variable [Milliken, 1987]. Uncertainty is one of the main challenges of contemporary strategic management. It is in the conditions of multi-faceted phenomena of uncertainty and discontinuity that the everyday life of organizations takes place, which, in response to the growing turbulence of the environment, not only redefine their strategies and goals, but also more actively strive to use opportunities arising from the environment to achieve additional benefits [Devece et al. al., 2016].

Researchers explain that as a result of encountering many types and forms of uncertainty, companies benefit from a forward-looking approach, adapting to variability and chaos [DeMeyer et al., 2002; Milliken, 1987; Zafari et al., 2020]. In turn, creativity and innovation are often improvisational in nature and require regular changes in response to new external information and changing environmental conditions [Amabile, Pratt, 2016]. In this perspective, establishing and developing cooperation becomes a popular way in which organizations can achieve and maintain responsiveness and competitiveness in unfavourable environmental conditions [McCutcheon, Stuart, 2000], because, as researchers point out, IC appears to be an effective and efficient way to increase the organization’s resilience in the face of threats and uncertainty [Svedin, 2016; Zafari et al., 2020]. Indeed, IC in conditions of uncertainty allows organizations to resist, develop, and survive [Laperche et al., 2011; Varadarajan, Cunningham, 1995; Zafari et al., 2020]. It is also indicated that crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the great uncertainty associated with them, require ‘great challenges’ from modern enterprises [Bertello et al., 2022], which can only be met thanks to coordinated and joint efforts of entities involved in cooperation [McGahan, 2021].

It can be argued that the fundamental problem in an uncertain environment is that managers are limitedly rational and are unable to foresee all eventualities and, consequently, conclude contracts that would take into account potential future problems [Klein et al., 1990].

Moreover, in the case of cooperation with competitors, in situations of high environmental uncertainty, relationships between competing entities may deteriorate, among others, as a result of a lack of trust in the partner trying to cope with unexpected changes and

discontinuity of the environment in a specific way [Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, 2013], which often, as a consequence of environmental pressure, may reveal, for example, opportunistic tendencies [Keränen et al., 2020].

Uncertainty and the risk associated with it also highlight the importance of reciprocity in interorganizational relationships, i.e. more than in normal conditions, the full commitment of the partner is expected, which is essential in mitigating the potential negative impact of chaos and uncertainty [Matopoulos et al., 2019]. The literature regarding IC carried out in conditions of uncertainty also indicates that solving problems, conflicts, or disputes is most often done in an unplanned manner, based on *ad hoc* actions aimed at coping with the problems of the parties involved in the relationship [Ley et al., 2012].

Companies engage in IC for various reasons and different theoretical approaches reflect the diversity of motives for cooperation, also the one established under uncertainty. It is, for example, stressed that through common ownership and joint commitment of resources cooperating entities reduce their transaction costs [Kogut, 1988; Niesten, Jolink, 2020]. Through the repetition of transactions, intensive exchange of information, or the use of informal security for the performance of contracts, transaction costs decrease [Dyer, 1997]. In the context of uncertainty, it is especially important that cooperative relationships also reduce risk (including a financial one) because it is incurred together with a known and trusted partner [Johnson, Houston, 2000]. Cooperation in the face of uncertainty may, therefore, provide protection against contractual threats resulting from opportunistic behaviour, while joint investments in specific assets increase the value realized in situations of high uncertainty [Niesten, Jolink, 2012; Parmigiani et al., 2011].

Moreover, crisis situations such as COVID-19, characterized by high environmental uncertainty, are usually associated with a large shortage of resources. Cooperation between organizations allows partners to benefit from sharing resources [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020], especially specific ones, or from creating common resources [Westley, Vredenburg, 1997]. As confirmed by the research conducted so far, the resource base jointly generated by the entities involved in cooperation is by nature more resistant to threats [Child, Faulkner, 1998; Das, Teng, 1998; Fredrich et al., 2019], thus, it also allows for joint sharing of risks and costs between partners, which is important in the turbulent environment of the organization.

What is more, in conditions of increased environmental uncertainty, enterprises pay more attention to the development of learning practices and knowledge sharing. This is another reason for undertaking IC in uncertain times [Mamédio et al., 2019]. It must be stressed that the intensity of knowledge sharing is closely related to the intensity of interorganizational cooperation between enterprises, which is especially important for creative industries entities for which IC is one of the sources of creativity [Alves et al., 2007].

As DiMaggio and Powell [1983] claim, different types of pressures caused by social expectations may be particularly intense in conditions of high environmental uncertainty, e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic. In such a crisis situation, customers expect companies to mobilize fully and provide useful and timely solutions to meet their new needs resulting from the spread

of the virus. This type of pressure, usually resulting from a lack of resources and the need to introduce products and services quickly, prompts companies to seek cooperation to develop and implement innovations, often unrelated to the core business activities [Ferrigno, Cucino, 2021]. As the literature indicates, IC shortens the time to market a product by enabling the flow of knowledge between cooperating companies, but also favours the sharing of risks and costs [Greco et al., 2019]. Undertaking cooperation induced by instability and uncertainty of the environment shows that a threat can become an opportunity for development and have a positive impact on the research and development activities and pro-innovation activities of enterprises, by reducing technological risk, saving time and research costs, granting access to specialized technologies or using technological synergies [Porter, 1990]. From the point of view of absorption capacity [Volberda et al., 2010], with a high level of prior knowledge about market uncertainty, companies are more willing to capture and absorb external knowledge acquired from partners and increase their innovation capabilities [Liu et al., 2019].

When considering cooperation in conditions of uncertainty, it is also important what factors determine the choice of partners in such specific and difficult conditions. In this context one of the recent studies on the reasons for undertaking IC during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that for cooperation entities most often choose business partners identifying themselves with such features as [Gajda, 2020]: the ability to adapt to variable conditions beyond the control of the client/contractor, reliability and trust, openness to negotiations, discounts granted/promotions used, punctuality in settling liabilities, understanding and responsibility, but also short order completion times, the involvement and availability of a potential business partner, free communication, as well as readiness for remote cooperation and good financial condition.

Finally, it must be stressed that industry and situational conditions are not the only ones that lead directly to specific organizational behaviours [Czakoń, 2017; Porac et al., 1989], including a decision to cooperate. Between the context and behaviour there is an additional variable, i.e. the perception of decision-makers who may, for example, underestimate the potential threat due to the lack of experience or make strategically and economically irrational decisions [Haneberg, 2021; Rousaki, Alcott, 2006], also in relation to cooperation with potential or current partners [Haarhaus, Liening, 2020]. As the literature indicates, the effectiveness of interorganizational cooperation in the face of uncertainty depends, among others, on the managerial skills of those representing the parties involved, including the ability to coordinate joint activities, communicate and adapt actions and procedures to achieve common goals [Svedin, 2016]. This becomes even more difficult when openness and flexibility is required, when it comes to the need to generate new ideas and be innovative, which is typical of the creative industries entities [Alves et al., 2007] analyzed in this paper.

The role of interorganizational cooperation in creative industries

It is considered that creative industries (i.e. the ones that include economic activities that rely on people's creativity and skills and create innovative ideas disseminated and delivered to the market in the form of goods and services [UNCTAD, 2008]) are among the fastest growing and of strategic importance for the economy. This concerns not only Europe, but also the whole world [Bendassolli et al., 2009; Bilton, 2007; Li, 2020]. In a rapidly changing globalized environment, there must be created the right conditions for creativity, together with innovations [Noerchoidah et al., 2022], to become an integral part of a new business culture [Majdúchová, Barteková, 2020]. Creative industries are located at the intersection of art, culture, business, and technology, thus, they are characterized by significant development dynamics and interdisciplinary activity. The social, cultural (including art), business, and technological conditions of functioning of modern societies are subject to very dynamic changes, which is why organizations increasingly focus on individual talent, skills, and creativity.

With regard to creative industries, many of their attributes are distinguished in the literature [Chaston, Sadler-Smith, 2012; Davis et al., 2009]. The special features of creative organizations include innovation and the contribution of human creativity. Moreover, it is increasingly often stated that creativity and innovation are dynamic capabilities of a creative organization, important from the point of view of creating a competitive advantage and at the same time affecting the survival and maintenance of the organization in the market [Voigt, Bergener, 2013]. This competitive advantage is no longer about mathematics and science, it is about imagination, innovation, and creativity [Nussbaum, 2005]. What is more, the literature has long espoused the links between inter-firm cooperation and creativity [Alves et al., 2007; Becattini, 1990; Brusco, 1990].

In particular, cooperative ties are seen as providing participants with opportunities to liaise with and learn from others, and this, in turn can harness creative processes [Klimas, Czakon, 2022]. For individuals, gaining access to and participating in such networks may stimulate creative thoughts and add value to their own activities. Empirical analyses showed that when individuals establish or strengthen cooperative ties, these relationships can significantly improve business prospects (and, by implication, the financial viability) [Jackson, Tomlinson, 2009]. In creative industries, e.g. art, stronger cooperative ties can be invaluable in establishing and nurturing artistic talent [Jackson, Tomlinson, 2009]. The role of cooperation in stimulating creative processes features extensively in the literature [Becattini, 1990; Brusco, 1990], also emphasizing the positive impact of cooperation upon innovation [Porter, 1998; Klimas, Czakon, 2022]. If organizations want to remain competitive in a rapidly changing environment, they must create appropriate conditions for creativity and innovation to become an integral part of their business culture [Majdúchová, Barteková, 2020].

Development and dynamics of change are factors shaping the competitive advantage of many organizations, especially creative industries, hence they are required to be ready for change and open to the broadly understood environment. Therefore, traditional relationships based on

hierarchy are changing towards open ones that can dynamically respond to changes occurring in the turbulent environment [Caligiuri et al. 2000]. Researchers point to a close, synergistic relationship between openness and the development of creative industries [Albors-Garrigos, Barbera, 2012; Baldwin, Gelletly, 2003], and their unique ability to adapt to functioning in changing environmental conditions, including cooperation with various types of partners, and thus the readiness to create the dynamics of many business processes systematically and consciously [Foster, 2015]. Therefore, the external conditions for the development of openness in creative organizations depend mainly on interorganizational and interpersonal relationships, i.e. social relationships – relationships with customers, suppliers, competitors, as well as the readiness of individuals to cooperate and share knowledge, developing the level of trust that cooperation partners have in each other [Czernek-Marszałek et al., 2023]. Creative industries are characterized by networking and close cooperation (e.g. with universities, innovation incubators, competitors) and require considerable skills for cooperation and team building [Majdúchová, Barteková, 2020].

Method

To achieve the aim of the paper, in June 2021 4 Focus Group Interviews (FGI) were conducted with representatives of each of the 4 creative industries, i.e.: performative arts (theaters), local government cultural institutions (museums), computer and video game industry, and cultural tourism (culinary routes). Additionally, one mixed FGI, i.e. with entities representing all of the four industries was carried out.

The study was purposefully focused on the creative industries acknowledged as highly conditioned by uncertainty [Majdúchová, Barteková, 2020] and interorganizational cooperation [Jackson, Tomlinson, 2009; Wójcik, 2022]. The choice of the four creative industries, among many others to choose from, resulted from the fact that each member of the research team had previously conducted research in one of the four industries and knew its specifics. This was important for understanding the context of the research findings, especially important in qualitative research [Czernek-Marszałek, McCabe, 2022].

Each FGI was attended by 6 interviewees, hence the total number of interviewees was 30 people. The focus group research was intended to serve as a discussion between the interlocutors [Morgan, 1996], showing their own perspective on the analyzed issues, in particular interorganizational cooperation conducted in times of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of each of the 4 industries, the interlocutors were the owners or managers responsible for the relationships established by the organization with its environment.

As part of the purposive selection, it was assumed that the interviewees representing each of the 4 creative industries would meet the following criteria ensuring diversity, which is important in qualitative research [Lewis et al., 2003] in terms of: (1) market position, i.e. ‘important players’, recognizable in the environment as well as less known enterprises; (2) type

of activity – e.g. in relation to the gaming sector: distributors, producers of gaming equipment, but also creators or publishers; (3) geographical location – from different parts of Poland; (4) size of the enterprise in terms of the number of employees: micro, small, medium-sized, and large companies; (4) activity level – from high to low; (5) form of ownership – both public and private.

The tool used for the study was an interview scenario. The interviewees were asked who they cooperated with, what their motives for joining the cooperation were, what areas of firm activity the cooperation concerned (e.g. product design, delivery, promotion, distribution, etc.), and what factors determined the cooperation, in particular (since the scope of the research was broader than the aim of this paper) what the role of social relationships in IC was. The interviewees were asked to refer to the period of the previous 3 years, therefore, also to the time of operation in conditions of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The average interview lasted 2 hours and 17 minutes. The interviews were conducted by a moderator and all of them took place online using the Zoom application due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The interlocutors were asked about the possibility of recording the conversation and, after obtaining their consent, the recordings were transcribed.

The written material was then coded. The codes applied to the empirical material concerned: (1) changes in cooperation partners caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) new motives and goals of cooperation that emerged as a result of enterprises operating in new conditions, as well as (3) changed opportunities for establishing or developing cooperation (especially regarding possibilities of building social relationships). The quotations from the interviews presented in the paper (coded as from R1 to R6 in each of the 5 FGI) allowed us to show changes in the implementation and development of IC when the company operates in the market in new, difficult-to-predict conditions of COVID-19.

Findings

Our research shows that in conditions of uncertainty, in particular that resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, interorganizational cooperation in the creative industries still existed, even in the era of strict lockdown. However, very often cooperation had a completely different form, because three main elements changed: (1) IC partners, (2) opportunities to build social relationships underlying the establishment of IC, and (3) motives and goals of undertaking cooperation.

Partners of IC

Our research showed that under the large-scale emergency, the group of partners changed significantly. In particular, our interlocutors pointed out that the number of their partners had been reduced, which made it impossible or at best difficult to continue many valuable forms of IC:

Looking at this list [of potential partners]... I mean, in general, I think we have to describe the pre-pandemic time. I'm already biting my tongue because I wanted to talk about things that had happened before the pandemic and now, for understandable reasons, they are not happening. [5R4]

Quite recently, we started cooperation with social welfare homes at a larger scale – unfortunately, it was quickly interrupted by the pandemic. We were even supposed to carry out such a cool intergenerational project together for ministerial money, combining the experiences of people from special welfare homes with the school youth, but due to the pandemic we had to abandon the implementation of this project. Also, the university of the third age, of course, the remand centre, we regularly give exhibitions to the remand centre, as well as lectures, the employees also go there. [1R4]

As a result, the interruption of IC hindered, among other things, the exchange of knowledge, experience and establishing contacts, which are a source of innovation in the creative industries.

And such experiences recently, when we were closed as an institution to this direct contact – but not to be overestimated with our recipients – made us all realize that this organizational innovation probably comes from the strength of the team, in my case primarily. [1R1]

And I remember how long a discussion and how hot a topic it was about the festival club, which we couldn't organize in such a form this year... We also know how many ideas, how many collaborations were born in this festival club, and it was only visible this year when we lacked this form. That is, we found a different form, we found another place, outside. The festival was in June, so it could have been an outside place, but the fact that we cannot organize it in the form we usually do also made us realize how important it is for the festival and for us, for artists, for this exchange of thoughts, ideas, emotions, how important this festival club is.... Without the festival club this festival would be very handicapped in this sphere of interpersonal relations that later result in cooperation. [5R4]

Opportunities to build social relationships underlying the establishment of IC

The interviewees indicated that the reason for difficult IC or its lack during the strict lockdown was the lack of existing opportunities (e.g. events such as conferences or trade fairs) to make acquaintances between entrepreneurs. The fact that the form of establishing contacts, including IC, changed due to the pandemic – from live to online – did not necessarily serve cooperation and establishing interpersonal relationships crucial to cooperation, especially in the creative industries:

Moderator: Where are these sources, the beginnings of the relationship?

Interviewee: I think that for us, first of all, there are various types of events, because that's probably where we get to know each other best as people, not as companies, not creators of something. Well, you know, now in the time of COVID it has stopped a bit and you can also see that it has

slowed down making new friends a bit... Because most often at such events, apart from the time of standing at their stands, it is then an internal event for those who came there to represent their companies in the evening, and then everyone casually establishes interpersonal relations with each other. [4R6]

I think so, in my industry, most of them were fairs, such as the Polagra fair in Poznań or the ecological fair in Łódź. Unfortunately, this has now been interrupted due to COVID, and unfortunately, it's not taking place. Likewise, our heritage, the flavours of the regions, were also a treasure trove of products, producers, new acquaintances, and exchanges of all this. Because I went alone, or my mother went, or with my friend Maciej, they were looking for new products for our stores. And thanks to this, we also got to know each other, and at this point, it is only an Internet source, and there are few interpersonal contacts. [4R5]

Motives and goals of IC

The conducted FGIs revealed that very often the pandemic forced the need for IC for completely different purposes than had been achieved before.

Our interviewees indicated that establishing cooperation or intensifying the existing cooperation in times of uncertainty related to the pandemic was necessary to survive in the market. This goal encouraged entrepreneurs to look for new partners or intensify the previously undeveloped cooperation. For example, at one point, when pupils returned to schools, they became a good cooperation partner for entities representing museums:

For some time now, we have also been trying to establish closer cooperation with schools. Previously, this cooperation was quite limited, but for several months now, as part of the development of museum education, we have been trying to establish cooperation with schools at various levels, from primary schools to universities and even universities of the third age or children's universities. So here, the cooperation is quite broad. But as I also said, we are looking for new opportunities and looking for new partners because it seems that nowadays we need to look for different paths and opportunities to make these museums reach the widest possible audience. [1R5]

Another goal of establishing IC was to exchange experiences related to functioning in times of the pandemic, thus enabling entities to operate in difficult conditions of uncertainty:

Interviewee: there is the so-called musical theatre conference, which has quite regular meetings where we exchange our observations, thoughts, and ideas on how to function during the pandemic. Because this pandemic also had quite a significant impact on tightening such cooperation, which is already very practical and current: "how do you organize this 50 percent?", "and now how do you want to check who has been vaccinated?", "what idea do you have for making sure people wear masks?"

Moderator: ad hoc need to force some exchange of experiences?

Interviewee: yes, exactly! [5R4]

The interviewees indicated that the purpose of establishing IC was – apart from advice – also to provide real help in crisis situations, which are common in times of uncertainty. This was largely due to the existence of interpersonal (social) relationships between the cooperating entities, which enabled or facilitated such cooperation:

Especially in crisis situations that regularly affect our industry, because these are simply very uncertain times, but also because if we operate as an association, no one works full-time, and all our management board members also have their own artistic activity, so in short, it was also our fault that crisis situations occurred because we missed something and had to be saved immediately. Back then, there were situations like calling a friend, giving good advice, and quick help, and it almost always worked. [4R4]

And there is also such a friendship between our producers that one of the girls planned an event on Facebook during the pandemic, but she experienced sadness in her family and was unable to host the meeting. So, she called me to see if I was available, because she knows what I do and all that, and I ran it for her. So as not to lose the face, because why explain something to a stranger, or better yet, to a friend. Also in my industry, sociability, private and non-private acquaintances play an important role. [4R5]

Moreover, the interviewees emphasized that in difficult situations, e.g. those caused by uncertainty, verified partners, and thanks to social relationships, they were better able to cope with uncertain conditions of functioning in the market:

Interviewee: I think that, in fact, these private contacts work so well for us, it verifies everything if there is a problem.

Moderator: so, difficult situations are verification?

Interviewee: and it's in situations like this that I really do, yes. Sometimes everything seems to be working fine until a problem occurs. Fortunately, it often turns out that we are able to solve this problem. [3R2]

Finally, the goal of the cooperation undertaken in times of rapid change, also resulting from the pandemic, was to intensify innovative activities, which, in the new realities, often became crucial to survive in the market:

In fact, every entity in the industry is trying to shorten the production period, because the game's production period is long, the bigger the game, the longer the production period, and as we know, this is also not conducive, because when we started with some assumptions and conditions of some market, and we finish in 3 years, in these times things are changing so quickly that even the pandemic has shown us that we may already be completely out of date, so to speak. So, among others, these activities of the National Centre for Research and Development and these projects (with cooperators), as I see it, whether we or some other entities from the industry, from the Polish market, well, each of us is trying to obtain funding somewhere for innovation, for example inventing some new processes, shortening, optimizing something. [4R2]

To sum up, the research has shown that due to the need to be innovative and creative, entities in the creative industries must cooperate, and this cooperation becomes even more important in conditions of uncertainty. IC in crisis situations such as COVID-19 still existed, although the partners, motives for undertaking cooperation, its goals, and opportunities to establish or develop cooperation (especially through building social relationships between potential or actual partners and forms of their communication – most often online instead of live) changed. Research has also shown that situations of uncertainty, often resulting from crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, also verify the group of trusted partners, which paradoxically constitutes value for the company in the context of future interorganizational relationships.

Summary

Theoretical contribution

This paper addresses the issue of interorganizational cooperation in a relatively underexplored context – operating under conditions of high uncertainty [Ingram, 2023]. As claimed by Nohrsted and co-authors [2018, p. 257] “interorganizational cooperation may be seen as capacity to prepare for and bounce back from disruptive crisis events”. Given that the modern economy is more prone to crises and their dynamics increase, the role of IC becomes critical.

Our research showed that despite the uncertainty a cooperation in creative industries still existed, although most often, IC was completely different than before. In a graphical way we summarize the main findings and contributions of our study in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The main changes of interorganizational cooperation driven by uncertainty



Source: own elaboration.

Our research confirms previous studies, indicating that high environmental uncertainty and accompanying crises, such as COVID-19, affect IC [Castañer, Oliveira, 2020; J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020; McCutcheon, Stuart, 2000; McGahan, 2021; Zafari et al., 2020], making it more *ad hoc* and flexible [Ley et al., 2012]. High uncertainty in the environment was an incentive to change existing cooperation relationships, i.e. its sides (partners), opportunities to establish or develop cooperation, including possibilities of building social relationships and form of contact between partners (online instead of live), and motives (e.g. striving to exchange resources, which have become even more scarce in a situation of uncertainty, in order to survive in the market) [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020; Ferrigno, Cucino, 2021; Greco et al., 2019]. The pressure caused by growing uncertainty also had an impact on the duration of cooperation, i.e. relations between collaborating organizations often deteriorated [Svedin, 2016], causing the termination of current joint activities.

Importantly, our research showed that operating under conditions of uncertainty influenced cooperation in two ways.

On the one hand, it stimulated entities to cooperate, mainly in order to acquire complementary resources (also in the form of knowledge or experience) needed to survive in the market, develop new products or services to stand out and meet new customer expectations [Amabile, Pratt, 2016; DeMeyer et al., 2002; McCutcheon, Stuart, 2000; Milliken, 1987; Zafari et al., 2020]. Thus, our research confirms the results of other studies [e.g. Huxham, Vangen, 2005], indicating that in conditions of uncertainty, entities often cooperate because they are unable to provide products and services independently as they have done so far, or are unable to meet independently customer needs that changed during the pandemic. It turned out that it was necessary or helpful to establish cooperation with new partners or to strengthen cooperation that had been less developed so far (an example of intensified cooperation between museums and schools). In this respect, our research is consistent with what other authors claim [e.g. Ryszko, 2015; Scholten et al., 2019], which is that enterprises operating in conditions of rapid changes and environmental instability are more interested in interorganizational cooperation and close relationships with partners than enterprises operating in stable conditions. Our research also seems to confirm the point of view of those authors who believe that IC can be an effective and efficient way to increase the organization's resilience in the face of threats and uncertainty [Laperche et al., 2011; Svedin, 2016; Varadarajan, Cunningham, 1995; Zafari et al., 2020]. Our findings reflect examples of cooperation initiatives in which entities from creative industries, similarly to those in the pharmaceutical or aviation industry [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020; Radziwon et al., 2022], joined forces to face the challenges of the pandemic.

On the other hand, our research showed that operating in conditions of uncertainty limited cooperation, and thus innovation and creativity, because some forms of cooperation could not take place, contact between partners was difficult or only online. This, in turn, was not conducive to establishing interpersonal relationships, which are very important for cooperation, especially in the creative sector characterized by openness towards partners, as well as

creativity and innovation [Majdúchová, Barteková, 2020]. This remains in line with research on the environmental uncertainty showing the negative effect of IC implemented in networks on innovations, which is even more significant and negative if the business environment is uncertain [Wang, Feng, 2012].

Among the presented theoretical approaches explaining the motives for cooperation, the findings of our research are most consistent with explanations focusing on the need to acquire complementary resources [J.M. Crick, D. Crick, 2020] or creating common resources [Westley, Vredenburg, 1997], learning and knowledge transfer [Mamédio et al., 2019] (especially very practical ones related for example to the functioning of existing legal solutions regarding the pandemic or the possibility of using state aid, and dealing with various crisis situations), as well as unusual activities based on creativity and innovation [Ferrigno, Cucino, 2021; Liu et al., 2019]. Our interviewees did indicate the reduction of transaction costs or business risk as a motive for joining cooperation. However, this does not mean that this motive was not on the minds of the interlocutors, but probably in the times of very difficult conditions in which they had to operate, especially high uncertainty, minimizing costs through regular, repeated cooperation with market partners was very difficult or even impossible. Our interlocutors emphasized that they had to give up many forms of cooperation that they had regularly implemented with other entities, at least temporarily.

Among the desirable characteristics of potential partners in the conditions of COVID-19 identified by Gajda [2020], our research showed that entrepreneurs were looking for partners characterized by: reliability, trust, understanding and responsibility, involvement, availability of a potential business partner, and readiness for remote cooperation. All of them were important, especially when it comes to mutual advice or assistance in crisis situations. However, the interviewees did not mention that cooperation in conditions of uncertainty required full commitment from them [Matopoulos et al., 2019]. Rather, they emphasized that commitment was appreciated to the extent to which the partner could actually get involved in difficult circumstances, and any involvement beyond these expectations was perceived as an added value (e.g. help in crisis situations cited by the interviewees).

Moreover, our research confirms that cooperation in conditions of uncertainty depends on the managerial skills of representing parties involved, in particular on their ability to communicate or adapt actions and procedures [Svedin, 2016], which changed significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, as our research showed, informal social relationships between entrepreneurs proved to be very helpful. Those of them who had such relationships could solve problems more easily, especially in crisis situations. This allows us to confirm the results of other works [Czernek-Marszałek et al., 2023] on the positive role of social relationships in solving various types of crisis situations.

Research limitations

While our study sheds light on the specificity of interorganizational cooperation under the conditions of uncertainty, and thus contributes to relational view in strategic management, there are some limitations worth of our comment. Our field investigation was conducted using virtual FGIs, therefore, its findings are prone to the following limitations [Sweet, 2001]: limited number of interviewees, limited independence of opinions formulated by interviewees, subjectivity of both interviewees and researchers. Moreover, our study was limited to one country and four creative industries only. Finally, our research revealed that large-scale emergency leading to business uncertainty brings – next to positive – also negative effects for IC. However, it seems that our study, also due to the above-mentioned limitations, shows just some of the possible consequences and more of them could have been identified.

Future research implications

Based on our research and its limitations we can propose some future research directions. Firstly, in the future it would be recommended to replicate the investigation in other national and industrial contexts. Secondly, the negative effects of cooperation implemented throughout uncertain business environments, including crises and worldwide emergencies, are expected to be multidimensional and multilevel. As we mentioned only some of them, we see their further exploration as a promising field of research inquiry. For instance, in the context of coopetition, i.e. cooperation with competitors, there can be even more problems with too high asymmetry and value appropriation, as suggested by J.M. Crick and D. Crick [2020], or under the COVID-19 pandemic with corruption and opportunistic behaviours as shown by Turner, Segura, and Nino [2022]. Thus, this area definitely deserves further research. Moreover, following suggestions made by J.M. Crick and D. Crick [2020], we would like to encourage to conduct research on IC in terms of its antecedents, process, and outcomes in the context of uncertainties, crises, and emergencies, as such knowledge is limited.

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