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## ARTICLES / ARTÍCULOS

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# Cooperative identity: a systematic literature review

(Identidad cooperativa: una revisión sistemática de la literatura)

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**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Methodological aspects. 3. Results and analysis. 3.1. Selected articles. 3.2. Presentation of results generated by software. 3.3. Analysis of results. 4. Concluding remarks. 5. References.

**Sumario:** 1. Introducción. 2. Aspectos metodológicos. 3. Resultados y análisis. 3.1. Artículos seleccionados. 3.2. Presentación de resultados generados por software. 3.3. Análisis de resultados. 4. Observaciones finales. 5. Referencias.

**Abstract:** Cooperatives driven by the Cooperative Identity have a scope of action that goes beyond their economic purposes. This article aims to understand how the Cooperative Identity has been discussed between the years 2019 to 2023. A systematic literature review was conducted using the *Methodi Ordinatio* approach on databases, and the content was analyzed using Mendeley®, VOSviewer®, and NVivo® software. The results indicate a prev-

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absence of discussions on the 5th principle (Education, Training, and Information) and little discussion on the other six principles. Among the principles not discussed are those that impact management and, in turn, can strengthen the Cooperative Identity. In general, cooperatives are mainly treated as mere subjects of study.

**Keywords:** principles of cooperativism; cooperativism; *Methodi Ordinatio*; cooperative identity.

**Resumen:** Las cooperativas guiadas por la Identidad Cooperativa tienen un ámbito de actuación que va más allá de sus fines económicos. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo comprender cómo discutió la Identidad Cooperativa entre los años 2019 y 2023. Se realizó una revisión sistemática de la literatura utilizando el *Methodi Ordinatio* en bases de datos, y para analizar el contenido se utilizó el software Mendeley®, VOSviewer® y NVivo®. Los resultados indican que predominan los debates sobre el quinto principio (educación, formación e información) y pocos sobre los otros seis principios; Entre los principios no discutidos se encuentran aquellos que impactan en la gestión y que a su vez permiten reforzar la Identidad Cooperativa; En general, las cooperativas son tratadas únicamente como objetos de estudio.

**Palabras clave:** principios del cooperativismo; cooperativismo; *Methodi Ordinatio*; identidad cooperativa.

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## 1. Introduction

A cooperative, according to the definition by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), is “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (ICA, 2015, p. ii).

Cooperatives driven by the Cooperative Identity, a set of values and principles, have a scope of operation far beyond their economic purposes. In other words, the Cooperative Identity takes on a bidimensional character: the first dimension being a voluntary association of individuals aiming to address their economic, social, and cultural needs, and the second being that of a proper enterprise.

However, it is essential to note that these principles are flexible. They serve as an ethics guide and should be applied considering cultural, social, legal, and normative contexts, as well as the specificities of the regions where the cooperatives operate. Consequently, cooperatives differentiate themselves from mercantile enterprises, facing distinct challenges in management. Typically, discussions are predominantly focused on organizations with economic interests, public organizations, and exclusively social-focused organizations. According to the ICA (2015), one could argue that a cooperative embodies a blend of these three types of organizations. Nevertheless, many cooperatives tend to emphasize one or another of these aspects, neglecting to promote their own identity. Therefore, it is paramount for cooperatives to grasp the essence of the Cooperative Identity.

The Cooperative Identity is anchored in values that emphasize self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity (SCHNEIDER, 2019). Over time, however, certain cooperatives have encountered challenges in maintaining this identity. The ICA then led a process to develop the principles (from 1895 to 1995) through which cooperatives could solidify their operational practices, aiming to reinforce the Cooperative Identity.

Since 1995, there are seven cooperative principles: 1) voluntary and open membership; 2) democratic member control; 3) member economic participation; 4) autonomy and independence; 5) education, training, and information; 6) cooperation among cooperatives; and 7) concern for community (ICA, 2022). The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) stands as the representative organization of cooperatives globally and thus is the so-called guardian of the Cooperative Identity (FONTELA, 2017).

Cooperatives committed to the Cooperative Identity promote more sustainable socio-economic and environmental practices (NOVKOVIC, 2022). The pursuit of collective well-being leads to conscious and bal-

anced decision making, prioritizing long-term development over immediate gains, essential for preserving natural resources and economic resilience, and benefiting the community in which cooperatives are embedded. By upholding their identity, cooperatives are more likely to distribute the benefits of their activities fairly among members, alleviating inequalities and contributing to reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion. The Cooperative Identity reinforces a sense of belonging and encourages members to be actively involved in the decision making process and to participate in cooperative actions.

Thus, a comprehensive understanding and application of the Cooperative Identity can empower cooperatives to play an active role in fostering sustainable development within their region of activity. This rationale justifies this article, as understanding how Cooperative Identity has been addressed in the literature can shed light on some of the challenges surrounding research and practices around cooperatives. Therefore, the goal of this article is to comprehend how the Cooperative Identity is being discussed in academic literature from 2019 to 2023.

The article is divided into four sections. Section 2 presents the methodological aspects, while section 3 elaborates on the research findings and respective analyses. Finally, the concluding remarks are expressed in section 4.

## 2. Methodological aspects

The literature review methodology is extensive, encompassing published studies that provide an assessment of literature related to specific subjects (GALVÃO; RICARTE, 2019). The literature review methodology is extensive, encompassing published studies that provide an assessment of literature related to specific subjects. According to Grant and Booth (2009), there are 14 types of literature analysis, ranging from an overview to systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

This article was developed using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology based on *Methodi Ordinatio* and utilizing Mendeley®, VOSviewer®, and NVivo® software for data tabulation and analysis.

According to Pagani, Kovaleski, and Resende (2015), *Methodi Ordinatio* is a type of SLR composed of nine stages (E1 to E9), which are as follows: (E1) Establishing the intention of research; (E2): Exploratory preliminary research with keywords in databases; (E3) Definition and combination of keywords and databases; (E4) Final search in the databases; (E5) Filtering procedures; (E6) Identification of impact factor, year of publication, and number of citations; (E7) Ranking the papers using the *In-Ordinatio*; (E8) Finding the full papers; (E9) Final reading and systematic analysis of the papers (PAGANI; KOVALESKI; RESENDE, 2015).

From the tabulated data in a spreadsheet, the *Index Ordinatio (In-Ordinatio)* is calculated, enabling the sorting of articles according to their relevance. The formula for the *InOrdinatio* (PAGANI; KOVALESKI; RESENDE, 2015) is as follows:

$$InOrdinatio = (IF / 1000) + \alpha * [10 - (Ry - Py)] + (\sum Ci)$$

Where:

IF is the impact factor;

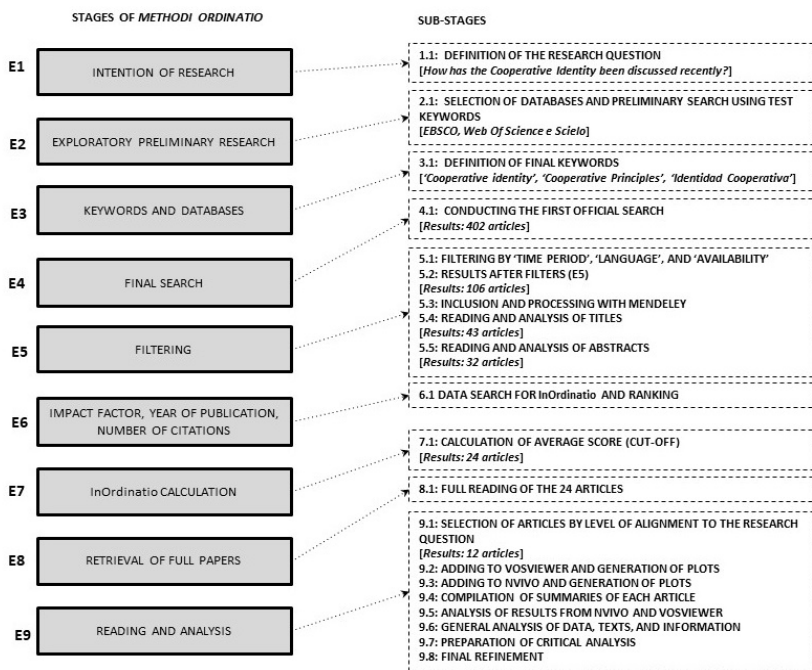
$\alpha$  is a weighing factor ranging from 1 to 10 (10 in this work);

Ry is the current year of the systematic review;

Py is the year in which the paper was published;

Ci is the number of times the paper has been cited.

For the operationalization of the study, the nine stages were sub-divided into 20 sub-stages. This approach was taken because the nine states of *Methodi Ordinatio* serve as guidelines, but each stage can be executed using various processes and tools. In the case of this research, the breakdown of the sub-stages is illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 1  
Phases of the *Methodi Ordinatio*

The 20 sub-stages are as follows: (1.1) Definition of the research question: 'how has the Cooperative Identity been discussed in academic literature between the years 2019 and 2023?'; (2.1) Selection of databases: EBSCO, WEB OF SCIENCE, and SCIELO, and preliminary exploratory search using test keywords; (3.1) Definition of final keywords: 'Cooperative Identity', 'Cooperative Principles', '*Identidad Cooperativa*'; (4.1) Conducting the first official title search: EBSCO: 40 + WEB OF SCIENCE: 216 + SCIELO: 146 = 402 articles in total; (5.1) Application of filters: temporal cutoff from 2019 to 2023, written/published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, and considering only complete articles available in the databases; (5.2) Results after filters: EBSCO: 14 + WEB OF SCIENCE: 43 + SCIELO 49 = 106 articles; (5.3) Download of the 106 articles, inclusion in Mendeley®, data processing, and elimination of 11 duplicate articles. Partial result: 95 articles; (5.4) Filter #4: Reading and analysis of titles, eliminating 52 articles that did not align with the research theme. Partial result: 43 articles; (5.5) Reading and analysis of abstracts. Partial result: 32 articles; (6.1) Data search for *Methodi Ordinatio*: impact factor, year, and number of citations for each article, followed by sorting using *InOrdinatio*, generating a ranking based on their relevance; (7.1) Calculation of the average score for articles through *InOrdinatio* (70), which was used as a cutoff criterion, resulting in 24 articles; (8.1) Full reading of the 24 articles; (9.1) Selection of articles to be included in the study using a 'level of alignment with the research question' criterion, with levels: fully connected, relatively connected, and not connected. Result: 12 fully aligned articles; (9.2) Generation of the .ris file in Mendeley® and data processing in VOSviewer® to plot graphs for analysis; (9.3) Inclusion of the 12 articles in NVivo® software and generation of word frequency analysis; (9.4) Compilation of a summary for each of the 12 articles, forming the basis for section 3.1 of this review; (9.5) Generation of results using NVivo® and VOSviewer® software; (9.6) General analysis of data, texts, and information; (9.7) Manuscript preparation; (9.8) Manuscript refinement and final conclusions.

### 3. Results and analysis

This section is divided into three parts, presenting: the selected articles; the findings derived from textual analysis; and finally, a comprehensive analysis based on the results.

### 3.1. Selected articles

In accordance with sub-stage 5.5 of the *Methodi Ordinatio*, 33 articles were selected for abstract reading, from which their average score was calculated through the *InOrdinatio*. The resulting ranking is presented in Table 1, which displays the sequential order of importance. Next, a score of 70 was applied as a cutoff criterion, leading to a selection of 24 articles.

**Table 1**  
Selected articles scored according to *InOrdinatio*

Ranking	Index Ordinatio Score	Title	Selected via Index Ordinatio	Final selection after full reading
Article 1	115,08	Riesgo del crecimiento organizacional para la identidad cooperativa	X	X
Article 2	101,72	La cooperación entre cooperativas: principio o necesidad?	X	X
Article 3	90,81	Governance and performance model for agricultural cooperatives	X	
Article 4	90,81	Significado del 7.º principio de la Alianza Cooperativa Internacional	X	X
Article 5	90,81	Las cooperativas en México y su compromiso con la comunidad. (7.º principio)	X	X
Article 6	90,81	Estudio de caso de dos cooperativas de Teruel (España), a partir del cumplimiento de los principios cooperativistas y de su rentabilidad financiera	X	
Article 7	90,72	Princípios do cooperativismo e a cultura do garimpo: uma análise nas cooperativas minerais de Minas Gerais	X	X
Article 8	90,63	Cooperativismo Agroindustrial: desafios gerenciais e possíveis soluções	X	X



Ranking	Index Ordinato Score	Title	Selected via Index Ordinato	Final selection after full reading
Article 9	83,72	La promoción del trabajo decente a través del principio cooperativo de educación, formación e información	X	
Article 10	81,72	Design Principles of Common Property Institutions: The Case of Farmer Cooperative in the Upper West Region of Ghana	X	
Article 11	80,72	Os grupos económicos cooperativos na encruzilhada entre os princípios da intercooperação e da autonomia e da independência. Uma análise à luz do direito português	X	
Article 12	80,64	Revisión Sistemática del concepto Gobernanza Cooperativa	X	
Article 13	80,64	Bibliotecas y cooperativismo: mirada dialéctica desde el principio de educación cooperativa en la era digital	X	
Article 14	80,64	Análisis del proceso de control interno en cooperativas de ahorro y crédito	X	
Article 15	73,63	Legal Status and Development Trends of Credit Unions in Polish Law and its Compliance with the WOCCU Standards and the International Cooperative Principles	X	
Article 16	72,63	El reforzamiento de la identidad cooperativa a través de la formación: un elemento a considerar por el movimiento cooperativo	X	X
Article 17	72,63	Reconciling different truths about isomorphic pressure and distinctive behavior at European cooperative banks: Back to the future with Raiffeisen's principles	X	X

Ranking	Index Ordination Score	Title	Selected via Index Ordination	Final selection after full reading
Article 18	72,56	El Balance Social y las relaciones entre los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible y los Principios Cooperativos mediante un Análisis de Redes Sociales	X	
Article 19	71,63	El principio de educación cooperativa y su recepción legislativa	X	X
Article 20	70,63	La influencia del principio de la educación, formación e información en la identidad cooperativa: de las consecuencias prácticas de la aplicación meramente formal hacia la preservación de la esencia del cooperativismo en el escenario pos-pandemia	X	X
Article 21	70,63	El principio cooperativo de educación, formación e información desde una perspectiva histórica y doctrinal	X	X
Article 22	70,63	Projeções, conexões e instrumentos do princípio cooperativo da educação, formação e informação no ordenamento português	X	X
Article 23	70,63	Aplicación del Método del Aprendizaje Cooperativo en la formación de cooperativistas: retos y perspectivas	X	
Article 24	70,63	El principio de autonomía e independencia en la declaración sobre la identidad cooperativa	X	
Article 25	63,54	Problemas en las cooperativas mexicanas que atentan contra el principio de autonomía e independencia		
Article 26	60,54	La autonomía e independencia: análisis de la efectividad del cuarto principio del cooperativismo bajo la perspectiva de la ontología cooperativa		

Ranking	Index Ordinato Score	Title	Selected via Index Ordinato	Final selection after full reading
Article 27	60,48	La cooperativa como espacio de realización del derecho de participación de los adultos mayores		
Article 28	60,3	Los principios cooperativos desde el dilema ético y el grado de aplicabilidad		
Article 29	58,5	Federalismo e políticas de saúde no Brasil: características institucionais e desigualdades regionais		
Article 30	50,45	Governança em Cooperativas: Aplicação em uma Cooperativa Agropecuária		
Article 31	50,4	Princípios Cooperativos em Conflito		
Article 32	-25,7	Evolution of cooperative strategies from first principles		

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The 24 articles were read in full, with the premise that they aligned with the proposed research question: "How is the Cooperative Identity being discussed?". As a result, 12 articles were kept. The 12 selected articles deal with cooperative cases, principles and identity, as well as other topics related to cooperatives. Below is a synthesis of the discussion by the respective authors.

Silva *et al.* (2022) considers that the identity and principles of cooperativism form the basis for the existence of cooperatives and should be discussed and practiced in day-to-day operations. In their article, the authors analyzed 11 Brazilian cooperatives in the state of Minas Gerais, aiming to identify the extent to which these cooperatives adhered to the principles of cooperativism. Their findings indicated that "there was no clear evidence regarding the practice of cooperative principles, not even discussions about the principles in the minutes of meetings and/or bylaws" (SILVA *et al.*, 2022; p. 223). Based on this study, the authors assert that "the studied cooperatives do not promote actions to educate their membership roster" (SILVA *et al.* 2022; p. 225). This finding is noteworthy, as adherence to the principle of Education, Training, and Information is fundamental to ensuring an understanding

of the essence of cooperativism. The authors emphasize that, overall, the principles are not echoed in the majority of cooperatives, stating that “only Cooperative 1 consistently applies the principles that govern cooperativism” (SILVA *et al.* 2022; p. 229).

A study conducted in Colombia sought to determine the degree of application and the level of importance given to the cooperative principles by associates and executives of cooperatives in two main cities of the Department of Tolima.

These insights shed light on the discussion of how much the principles are disseminated, used, and validated by cooperatives worldwide. In this regard, a significant contribution was made by Vargas-Prieto and Arrieta-Díaz (2021), who conducted an analysis on agricultural cooperatives in France from the 1980s to 2021. The authors found that cooperatives struggled to compete with mercantile enterprises due to the significant growth of these capitalist organizations and the economies of scale achieved by them, resulting in increased price competitiveness in favor of the mercantile enterprises. In an attempt to mitigate this disadvantage, cooperatives allied with capitalist companies, leading to a hybrid governance model.

On one hand, this model has an associativism facet. On the other hand, however, it resembles a shareholder structure in relation to mercantile enterprises — aiming to industrialize the products made by cooperatives and gain more bargaining power in French markets. This approach has allowed cooperatives to stay in the market; nonetheless, it has presented issues related to distancing, complexity, and confusion in the agricultural sector. In other words, “*It is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate a cooperative from its competitors in the private sector*” (VARGAS-PRIETO E ARRIETA-DÍAZ, 2021, p. 616). Therefore, the challenge is to remain in the market without ceasing to be a cooperative.

In this ambiguous scenario, the fifth principle — Education, Training, and Information — emerges as a catalyst for the Cooperative Identity. Miranda and Lima (2020) depict the importance of this principle, emphasizing how fundamental it has become to the essence of Cooperative Identity. The authors also note that there is a dissemination of ideas and principles when cooperatives operate in the same market as mercantile enterprises. Therefore, principles cannot be mere topics for theoretical debates; they must be ingrained in the “soul” of the cooperative enterprise, enabling cooperative members to understand the meaning of this identity.

Martínez Etxeberria (2020) also emphasizes the importance of the cooperative principles as essential factors for maintaining the Coopera-

tive Identity. The author highlights the issue of “false cooperatives”, criticizing their lack of transparency with their members. The formation of cooperative values is a basic element in the professional qualification of members looking to be incorporated by cooperatives. Such values should be regarded as essential for the socio-environmental development of cooperatives.

In discussing the formation of new members, Meira (2020), addressing Education, Training, and Information within the legislative framework of Portugal, proposes the “aspiring cooperative member”, a kind of probationary period for new cooperative members. In other words, the suggestion is that a cooperative should offer a training program for beginners and, at some point, validate (or not) the new cooperative member based on how much they have embraced the cooperative spirit. For the author, there is no doubt that education is the catalyst for every other principle. Meira (2020) further emphasizes that non-compliance with the principles can be a factor leading to bankruptcy for cooperatives.

Cracogna (2020) also reflects on the fifth principle, its importance, and historical presence from 1844 to the present day. According to the author, this principle addresses themes related to cooperative education, employee training, and the development of young opinion leaders. In other words, it serves a dual function: internal and external. The author also reflects on the difficulties of incorporating the principles of Education, Training, and Information into the legislation of various countries, using Argentina as an example. Thus, in some cases, the principles are merely a declaration, while in others, deal with issues that do not truly promote cooperative education.

According to Martínez Charterina (2020), the fifth principle holds great importance in the history of cooperativism. For the author, this principle is the engine of cooperative development, as education contributes to responsible behavior of members. Through education, individuals can develop themselves and act as partners within the community, raising the standard of living in society. In this sense, Martínez Charterina (2020) highlights the relationship between the values of “self-help” and “self-responsibility”, as through education, each individual can steer its own destiny and assume their responsibility in collaborating towards collective development.

Another important aspect of the discussion relates to the sixth principle, cooperation among cooperatives. Cracogna (2021) discusses the origin of the concept that led to the emergence of said principle. In the early days of the cooperative movement, the idea of cooperation among cooperatives did not exist because there was yet

no awareness of the emerging movement. However, after the inclusion of this theme as one of the guiding principles in 1966, cooperation among cooperatives started to be valued and encouraged. The author argues that the competitive landscape drives a perspective of competitiveness through matters of scale, meaning that larger entities have more advantages. In this context, the principle of Cooperation among cooperatives can be a catalyst for the competitiveness of cooperatives: by cooperating and strategically aligning their actions, cooperatives can compete with their counterparts, which are often mercantile enterprises. This competitive landscape is present in various sectors, with some, such as agribusiness, placing a greater emphasis on the scale of production.

Regarding sector-specific challenges, Oliveira Júnior and Wander (2022) discuss the scenario of agro-industrial cooperatives, which are typically inserted in a conservative environment and need to remain competitive against mercantile enterprises. In light of this, the authors propose the following management initiatives: separation of control and ownership, strategic management, strategic alliances, brand management, restricted membership, social management, self-financing, and risk management. Concerning the credit sector, Groeneveld (2020) discusses European rural credit cooperatives, which originate in the 19th century with Raiffeisen and are founded on social innovation. Currently, however, there are only 12 cooperatives of this kind with over 100 years of existence. Groeneveld (2020) analyzes how these remaining cooperatives have adapted to competitive market requirements and how far they have distanced themselves from Raiffeisen's principles. There is a noted weakening of the bond with farmers, founders of the cooperatives, and an increase in the cooperative membership base, ultimately resulting in the weakening of principles. Nonetheless, these cooperatives still differentiate themselves from commercial banks and add value to their communities.

It just so happens that cooperatives exist to improve the lives of their members and are rooted to their territories and communities. Thus, the seventh principle — Concern for Community — is crucial for proper analysis of cooperativism and the Cooperative Identity. For Cracogna (2022), this principle is the most concise and synthesizes all other principles, encapsulating the essence of all cooperative organization and action — the concern for community should transcend individual interests. The seventh principle was endorsed at the Manchester Congress in 1995, and encourages cooperatives to work for the sustainable development of their communities. Consequently, cooperatives should not focus on growth at any cost, but instead seek a type

of development that considers current needs and can serve future generations from a social, economic, and environmental perspective.

The seventh principle implies that cooperative members are sensitized and are responsible for adopting policies aimed at achieving this. According to Cracogna (2022), collaboration between cooperatives and local governments is important to achieve these objectives. Martínez Etxeberria (2020) also addresses this and proposes strengthening sustainability in the cooperative movement.

In addition, Muciño (2022) reflects on the importance of rural cooperatives striving for the sustainable development of their communities through policies developed with the participation of their members. Specifically, the author analyzes the case of Mexican agricultural cooperatives, where consumer cooperatives are prevalent, collectivizing the production process and not linking production to income. This is due to the majority of producers having low levels of productivity, making production economically unviable. In this sense, based on the sharing of successful experiences with various Mexican cooperatives, there is a need to develop plans and programs that support the development of more cooperatives in all rural areas of the country, considering the benefits they can generate for their communities.

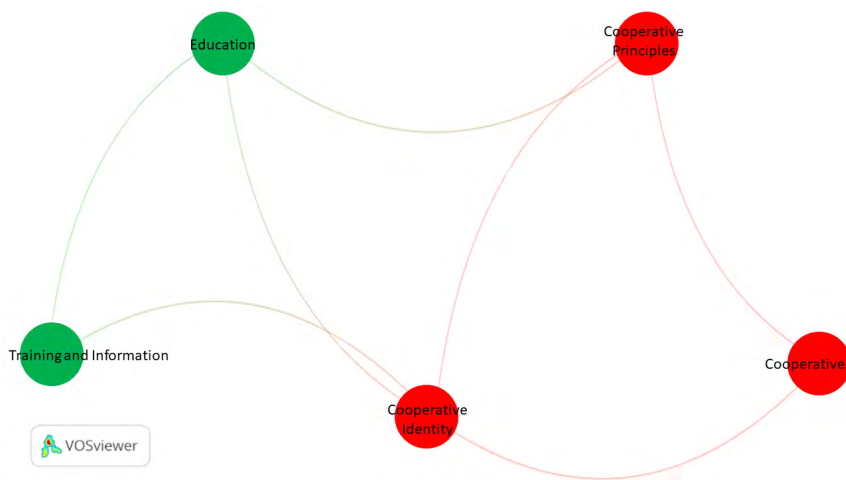
Returning to the initial discussion of this section, where identity is the foundational basis for the existence of cooperatives, there is a conviction that these principles must be discussed and practiced in daily operations. This reinforces the argument that cooperatives differ from mercantile enterprises and this distinction should be emphasized. By placing the principles of cooperativism as central pillars of management, the original Cooperative Identity, grounded in positive idiosyncrasies, can be maintained, allowing them to operate in the competitive market in a manner that is distinct from traditional capitalist organizations — which prioritize profit. For cooperatives, the guiding principle should be the improvement of the quality of life of their members.

Thus, from the authors selected in the systematic literature review, the importance and relevance of Cooperative Identity are evident. It has been noted that there is a variety of discussions about the fifth principle (Education, Training, and Information) and some discussions about the sixth (Cooperation among Cooperatives) and seventh (Concern for Community) principles. On the other hand, there are only superficial references to the first (Voluntary and Open Membership), second (Democratic Member Control), third (Member Economic Participation), and fourth (Autonomy and Independence) principles.

It is important to note that one of the conceptual pillars of Cooperative Identity is that the principles should be discussed and treated jointly, in a kind of systemic view. However, this approach was not observed in the selected articles.

### 3.2. Presentation of results generated by software

As mentioned in the section regarding the methodological procedures, sub-step 9.2, the articles discussed in the previous section were imported into the Mendeley<sup>®</sup> software where, after processing, a .RIS file was generated. The file was imported into the VOSviewer<sup>®</sup> software to conduct an analysis of their keywords, of which the most recurrent ones were: Training and Information, Education, Cooperative Identity, Cooperative Principles, and Cooperatives. Figure 2 depicts these results.



Source: Prepared by the authors, using VOSviewer<sup>®</sup>.

**Figure 2**  
Most frequent keywords

In Figure 2, the following connections can be observed:

Articles that discuss Education generally also address Training and Information, Cooperative Identity, and the Cooperative Principles, but discuss Cooperatives only a little;



Articles focusing on the Principles of Cooperativism typically also discuss Education, Cooperative Identity, and Cooperatives, but often discuss Training and Information less;

Articles discussing Cooperatives themselves usually also address Cooperative Identity and the Cooperative Principles, but they tend to discuss Education and Training and Information less;

Articles discussing Cooperative Identity typically cover all other themes: Education, Cooperative Principles, Cooperatives, and Training and Information;

Articles focusing on Training and Information generally also address Education and Cooperative Identity, but they often discuss Cooperatives and Cooperative Principles less.

Following these analyses, the 12 articles were input into the NVivo® software, where we utilized the most recurrent words. The cutoff was based on the understanding that 30 words would provide a general view of the focus of each article. To generate results, the following criteria were defined: words with more than three letters and exact matches. Results are presented in Figure 3.

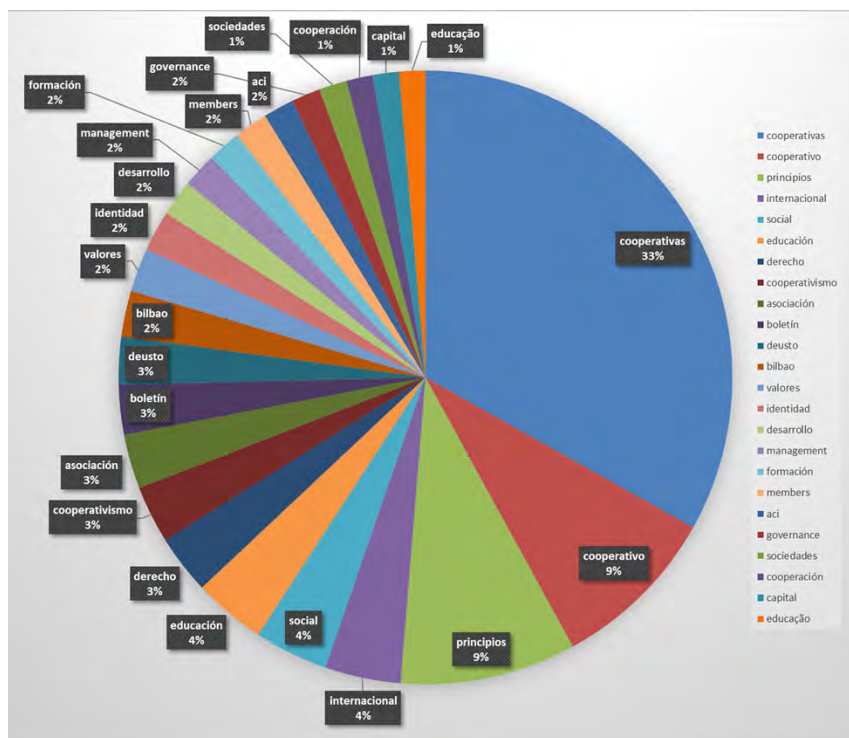


Source: Prepared by the authors, using Nvivo®.

Figure 3

List of the 30 most recurrent words in the selected articles

As per the established criteria, the 30 most recurrent words are: *cooperativas*, *cooperativa*, *cooperativo*, *principios*, *internacional*, *social*, *educación*, *cooperatives*, *cooperativos*, *principio*, *derecho*, *cooperativismo*, *asociación*, *boletín*, *deusto*, *bilbao*, *valores*, *identidad*, *desarrollo*, *management*, *formación*, *members*, *aci*, *governance*, *sociedades*, *principles*, *cooperación*, *capital*, and *educação*. This “database of words” served as the basis for constructing Graph 1, presented and discussed below.



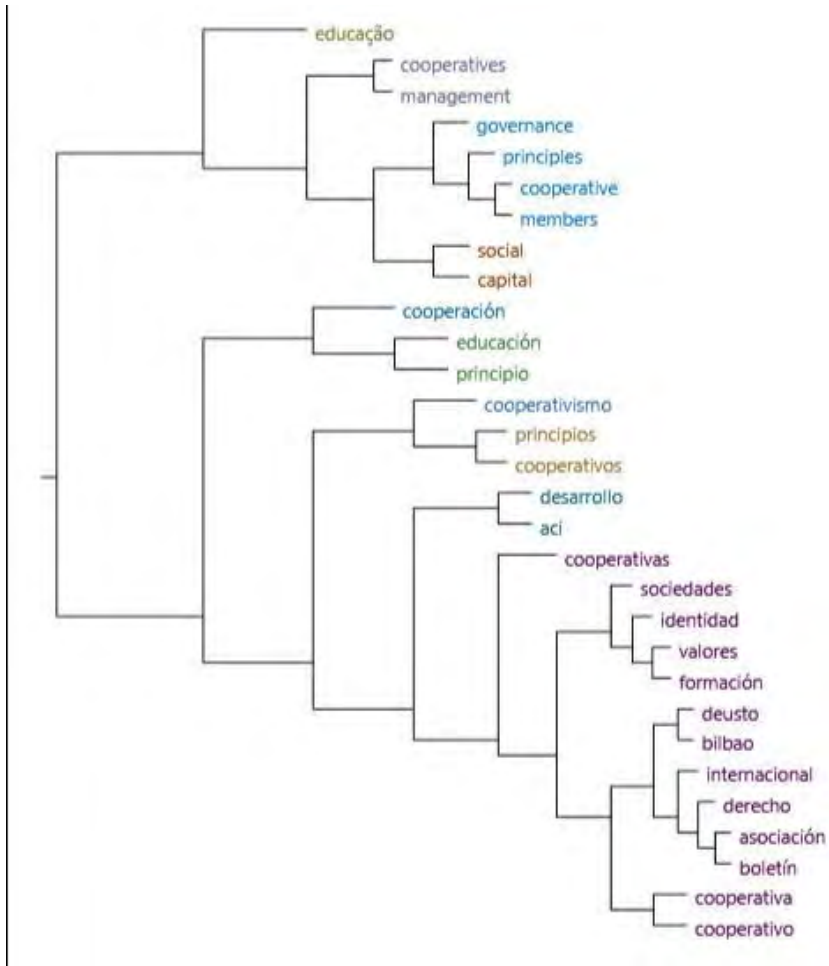
Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data generated by Nvivo® software.

Graph 1  
Word frequency

In Graph 1, the percentage of occurrence for each of the 30 words is presented. It can be observed that the majority of words appear with percentages below 4%: *social*, *educación*, *derecho*, *cooperativismo*, *asociación*, *boletín*, *deusto*, *bilbao*, *valores*, *identidad*, *desarrollo*, *management*, *formación*, *members*, *governance*, *aci*, *sociedades*, *cooperación*,

*capital*, and *educação*. Out of all 30 words, only three represent 51% of occurrences, where the term *cooperativa* prevails with 33% of occurrences, followed by the other two: *cooperativo* (9%) and *princípios* (9%).

Additionally, an attempt was made to identify clusters (i.e., correlations between terms) using the NVivo® program. This is presented in Figure 4.



Source: Prepared by the authors, using Nvivo®

**Figure 4**  
Word clusters

Initially, two major clusters are observed. The first consists of the words *educação*, *cooperatives*, *management*, *governance*, *principles*, *cooperative*, *members*, *social*, and *capital*, indicating that these words are systematically used together. Within this cluster, a subcluster is noticeable with the words *cooperative* and *management*; another subcluster connects the words *governance* with *principles* and *members*; and a third subcluster formed by the words *social* and *capital* stands out, indicating that these words are frequently discussed closely.

Figure 4 also presents a second cluster that groups all the words not mentioned in the above paragraph. A connection is noticeable between the words *cooperación*, *educación*, and *principio*. Another subcluster connects *cooperativismo* with *principios* and *cooperativos*. A subcluster occurs when there is a connection between the terms *desarrollo* and *aci*, indicating a proximity between terms denoting development (*desarrollo*) and the ICA (Intercational Cooperative Association). Another subcluster connects the terms *sociedades*, *identidad*, *valores*, and *formación*, indicating that these terms are discussed closely. Yet another subcluster connects *Deusto* and *Bilbao*, which are a district and a region in the Basque Country, respectively. One more subcluster is formed with the words *internacional*, *derecho*, *asociación*, and *boletín*; these words form the name of one of the most recurring journals in the sample discussed here. Lastly, the last cluster connects *cooperativa* and *cooperativo*, which are similar terms.

In this subsection, the outputs of the software used for textual analysis were presented. These data complement the research and are important to provide researchers with a possibly different, more systemic, and broader perspective than that resulting solely from reading the articles, which is a focused analysis limited to the article(s) themselves.

### 3.3. Analysis of results

This subsection presents an analysis of the results generated by the software and an overall analysis of the article. As mentioned earlier, the keywords used to search for articles in the databases were: 'Cooperative Identity', 'Cooperative Principles', 'Identidad Cooperativa'. These inputs generated an expectation that various articles would be found on the different principles. However, the results generated by Vosviewer® indicated the prevalence of the 5th principle (Education, Training, and Information), demonstrating little focus on the other principles.

As discussed in this article, the principles should not be analyzed in isolation (ACI, 2015; SCHNEIDER, 2019), as their effectiveness and efficiency are based precisely on the correlation between these principles. Each principle depends on the execution of the others; discussing or achieving only one principle does not improve the cooperative's position regarding Cooperative Identity. Thus, it is observed that the understanding of Cooperative Identity may be disconnected from cooperative practice. Without this understanding, it may seem that the principles and values are unattainable, and that the concern should be focused solely on financial results.

The results from the Vosviewer® software also indicate that the expression 'Cooperative Identity' is the central expression that connects the other expressions and that the word 'Cooperative' is not related to the word 'Education'. This analysis may suggest that 'Education' is mentioned more when discussing cooperative principles than when discussing cooperatives themselves. In other words, those discussing education in cooperatives do so through the lens of the cooperative principles. An interesting question then arises: why did 'Education' not generate a direct correlation with 'Cooperative'? Cooperatives have a long history of being linked to education since 1844. Could it be that education is being treated as an obligation rather than a strategy? These questions might suggest directions for future studies.

On the other hand, the analysis of the outputs from NVivo® software demonstrates that the primary focus of current studies is on the cooperative as the object of study. This finding is derived from the analysis of Figure 3 and Graph 1. This is a relevant problem for research because if cooperatives are seen merely as 'a different type of business' and not as organizations based on principles and values, there is likely to be little conceptual analysis and a greater production of studies that do not effectively develop the Cooperative Identity.

Furthermore, the analysis of Figure 4 allows us to observe that the studies do not focus on the principles and discuss Cooperative Identity to a lesser extent. Given the secondary position of the term 'identity', it raises even more doubt as to whether this expression (Cooperative Identity) is genuinely understood by researchers, managers, and other stakeholders in the world of cooperatives.

This analysis may suggest that there are shortcomings in understanding what Cooperative Identity is. If this hypothesis is true, we can begin to understand the observed deviations from purpose in cooperatives worldwide. Therefore, this study proposes a return to identity. This will be possible through the understanding that Cooperative Identity is the understanding of principles and values, their practical appli-

cation in the daily life of cooperatives, and primarily the discussion of all principles in an equitable, connected, and harmonious manner. In other words, the selected articles did not view Cooperative Identity in a systematic way.

Within the selected sample, the focus is on principles related to factors that are external to a cooperative (Cooperation among Cooperatives and Concern for Community) and primarily on a principle that connects their external and internal aspects, which is Education, Training, and Information. On the other hand, the principles related to cooperative management (Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation, and Autonomy and Independence) are discussed minimally, apparently demonstrating that there is limited concern in this regard in the literature.

It has also been discussed that over time, some cooperatives have faced challenges in maintaining their identity, risking becoming profit-focused enterprises — which could jeopardize their sustainability and purpose. The values were consolidated into principles to guide and become administrative practices. However, management is much more linked to the principles of Conscious and Voluntary Membership, Democratic Governance, Economic Participation, and Autonomy and Independence, which, in turn, are mere supporting actors in the discussions. This aspect could also be a focus of future studies.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

This study aimed to answer the research question: how is Cooperative Identity being discussed in academic literature between 2019 and 2023? The study aimed to answer this question through a systematic literature review and an analysis of the respective discourses by the selected authors.

Considering the discussion in this article, the following considerations can be made:

- I. There is a discussion in the literature about the cooperative principles, but the prevalent debate is about the 5th principle (Education, Training, and Information), followed by the 6th (Cooperation among Cooperatives) and 7th (Concern for Community) principles. The remaining principles are rarely discussed;
- II. The principles that are not discussed (Conscious and Voluntary Membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation, and Autonomy and Independence) are precisely

- those that impact the management of cooperatives, which in turn would have a greater potential to reinforce the Cooperative Identity;
- III. Overall, cooperatives are still treated as mere objects of study;
  - IV. The terms “principles” and “cooperative identity” appear in the search keywords, but their respective relevancies are not maintained throughout the articles;
  - V. For the development of cooperativism, focus should be on in-depth studies about the principles and values, particularly the first four principles, emphasizing theoretical and conceptual debate. It is also important for such debate to occur in a harmonious manner among the principles, with a holistic view rather than an isolated focus on one or a few principles.

Obviously, these considerations should be weighed in light of the limitations of the present study, such as the temporal cut-off of the research, the choice of the method for ranking construction, and the software used. Perhaps with different temporal cuts and methods, researchers could arrive at different conclusions, which only enriches the debate on this important topic of cooperativism.

The study contributes to the theoretical field by presenting a ranking and analysis of the 12 selected articles, containing the state of the art regarding the debate. In the professional field, for cooperatives, the article can serve as a guide for reflection and perhaps for actions to return to the cooperative essence, something dear and urgent for cooperatives worldwide. As a suggestion for future studies, an investigation into the lack of connection between the terms cooperative and education can be explored. Furthermore, the supportive role of the principles of Conscious and Voluntary Membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation, and Autonomy and Independence could be a subject of study.

Finally, it is worth noting something mentioned in the introduction of this study, where the flexible aspect of the principles was emphasized. They are not norms or constraints; on the contrary, the principles are conceptual and practical guides constructed to assist cooperatives in day-to-day management, directing them towards Cooperative Identity.

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