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Evolution of the concept of competitiveness: a chronological review of the main theories and approaches

**Evolución del concepto de competitividad: una revisión
cronológica de las principales teorías y enfoques**

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Abstract

This article offers a chronological overview of the ideas that have shaped the concept of competitiveness, with the aim of showing its evolution and how it has changed and found new applications over time. Through an in-depth review of the literature from the mid-20th century to the present, it explores classical foundations—such as neoclassical economics and the theory of comparative advantage—as well as recent approaches focused on innovation, intangible assets, sustainability, and a more systemic view of competitiveness. Throughout the analysis, key moments are identified that marked a shift in how the concept is understood: from a perspective focused solely on prices and productivity to more comprehensive models that also consider social, technological, and institutional factors. The study highlights how the concept has become increasingly interdisciplinary and emphasizes the need to adapt theoretical frameworks to the current challenges faced by both organizations and regions. This review aims to serve as a useful guide for those researching or working on sustainable economic development who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the conceptual foundations of competitiveness.

Keywords: competitiveness, economic theories, literature review, economic development, innovation

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece un recorrido cronológico por las ideas que han moldeado el concepto de competitividad, con el objetivo de mostrar su evolución y cómo ha cambiado y encontrado nuevas aplicaciones a lo largo del tiempo. A través de una revisión exhaustiva de la literatura desde mediados del siglo XX hasta la actualidad, explora los fundamentos clásicos —como la economía neoclásica y la teoría de la ventaja comparativa—, así como enfoques recientes centrados en la innovación, los

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activos intangibles, la sostenibilidad y una visión más sistémica de la competitividad. A lo largo del análisis, se identifican momentos clave que marcaron un cambio en la comprensión del concepto: desde una perspectiva centrada únicamente en los precios y la productividad hasta modelos más integrales que también consideran factores sociales, tecnológicos e institucionales. El estudio destaca cómo el concepto se ha vuelto cada vez más interdisciplinario y enfatiza la necesidad de adaptar los marcos teóricos a los desafíos actuales que enfrentan tanto las organizaciones como las regiones. Esta revisión pretende servir como una guía útil para quienes investigan o trabajan en el desarrollo económico sostenible y desean obtener una comprensión más profunda de los fundamentos conceptuales de la competitividad.

Palabras clave: competitividad, teorías económicas, revisión bibliográfica, desarrollo económico, innovación

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INTRODUCTION

In a business environment marked by dynamism and uncertainty, organizations are constantly under pressure to maintain their competitiveness in order to ensure their continued presence in the market. This scenario, already challenging for large corporations, becomes even more complex for micro and small enterprises (MSEs), which must overcome multiple obstacles to remain active (Elikem Ocloo, Akaba, & Worwui-Brown, 2014).

On a global scale, MSEs play a crucial role in contemporary economies, acting as generators of employment, sources of income, and drivers of innovation and growth (OECD, 2021). However, in the context of globalization, these enterprises face increasingly intense competition, particularly from large multinational corporations, which tends to diminish their local competitive capacity (Porter, 2007). In this sense, the business environment becomes a key factor that directly affects the growth and sustainability of these productive units (Wanjohi, 2008).

In Latin America, MSEs constitute the structural backbone of economic activity. According to data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2021), MSEs represent 99% of all enterprises and account for approximately 67% of employment in the region. Despite their importance, their contribution to regional economic development remains limited due to a range of barriers that restrict their competitiveness (Europyme, 2021).

In Mexico, MSEs represent a strategic component of the national economy, largely supported by a broad base of micro and small enterprises. These organizations, particularly those linked to highly dynamic sectors such as the automotive industry, face significant challenges in strengthening their competitive position both nationally and internationally (Espinoza, Cavazos, & Cruz Álvarez, 2019).

Competitiveness has become a central concept in the business and economic spheres, representing the ability of firms to maintain and enhance their profitability and market presence through advantages related to products, services, and the conditions under which these are offered (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, Secretaría General, 2021). According to the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO), competitiveness is defined as “the result of a set of structural economic, social, and political conditions.” A competitive country is one that consistently attracts and retains talent and investment. To measure this, IMCO developed the International Competitiveness Index (ICI), which evaluates the capacity to generate, attract, and retain both human and financial capital (IMCO, 2021).

Within this context, micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in the steel industry play a significant role in Mexico’s economic performance, particularly in the automotive sector (Nahuat Arreguin, Blanco Jiménez, Cruz, & Buenrostro, 2016). These firms are critical drivers of national development, not only through wealth creation but also as a primary source of employment (INEGI, 2021). However, recent global, national, and state-level indicators reveal a decline in competitiveness in Mexico, including the state of Nuevo León (Data México, 2023; IMCO, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). This downward trend has been further aggravated by the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (INEGI, 2022). Given that MSEs are key catalysts for regional economic and social growth, their competitiveness is essential for mitigating unemployment and sustaining local development (INEGI, 2021). Following the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the notion of competitiveness has taken on new dimensions, incorporating sustainability principles. The concept of sustainable competitiveness has emerged, defined as the set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine a country’s long-term productivity while ensuring social and environmental development (WEF, 2020). This perspective aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions into a systemic and interconnected vision.

The economic dynamism of Mexico is closely tied to the performance of MSEs, which underscores the need to identify the factors influencing their competitiveness. In this regard, generating knowledge that supports the strengthening and development of enterprises in strategic regions, such as the states of Coahuila and Nuevo León, is a priority. Consequently, this study aims to provide practical insights and tools that enable micro and small enterprises in the steel sector, particularly those oriented toward the automotive industry, to design and implement strategies to enhance their competitiveness. The main beneficiaries of this research are business owners, entrepreneurs, and managers operating within this sector.

Over the past decades, the concept of competitiveness has undergone a significant evolution, shifting from approaches focused exclusively on prices and productivity to more comprehensive perspectives that incorporate innovation, sustainability, human capital, and technological capabilities. However, despite the abundance of literature, there remains conceptual fragmentation and a lack of consensus regarding the theoretical foundations that explain how the concept has changed and what factors determine it in different historical and economic contexts. This situation hinders both the comparability of studies and the development of consistent analytical frameworks for the formulation of policies and business strategies.

Consequently, there is a need to conduct a chronological review that synthesizes the main theories and approaches that have defined competitiveness, identifying key conceptual transitions, the predominant variables in each period, and the trends guiding current research.

The concept of competitiveness is not only central in economic and business literature but also influences the strategic decision-making of governments, industries, and companies. However, its evolution has resulted in multiple, and at times contradictory, interpretations. A chronological review offers several key contributions:

Theoretical Contribution: It clarifies the conceptual roots and illustrates how classical theories (comparative advantage, costs, productivity) have been complemented or replaced by more recent paradigms (innovation, sustainability, dynamic capabilities).

Practical Relevance: It provides an updated reference framework for designing public policies and business strategies aligned with the factors that currently define competitiveness in highly dynamic global environments.

Academic Value: It responds to the need to systematize and organize a concept dispersed throughout the literature, offering a useful tool for researchers, students, and professionals seeking to understand the evolution of the term in an interdisciplinary context.

In short, this work aims not only to describe the past but also to identify the trends that shape the present and future of the concept of competitiveness, providing conceptual clarity and practical guidance.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to conduct a chronological review of the main theories and approaches related to competitiveness, analyzing their evolution from traditional cost-based perspectives to contemporary multidimensional frameworks. This review seeks to identify conceptual shifts, highlight emerging determinants of competitiveness, and provide a comprehensive understanding of how this construct has adapted to global economic transformations.

Accordingly, considering the diversity of existing definitions and interpretations of the term "competitiveness," the following section presents an overview of the theoretical framework, including definitions, relevant theories, and key studies that have shaped the understanding of competitiveness over time

The aim of this article is to review the conceptual framework that has guided the study of competitiveness as a key variable in business dynamics, highlighting its theoretical evolution over time and its applicability in emerging productive contexts. This article reviews the conceptual evolution of competitiveness, with a particular focus on its application in SMEs, addressing both the foundational theories and the recent transformations that have led to more comprehensive and sustainable approaches.

The general objective is to analyze the evolution of the concept of competitiveness through a chronological review of the main theories and approaches, identifying the key conceptual milestones and their implications for current business and economic contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a documentary and theoretical review approach, based on an exhaustive exploration of specialized academic literature. The research design is based on a documentary and theoretical review. Information sources included academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO, and Google Scholar, as well as institutional reports and books. The search and selection process were designed to ensure the inclusion of relevant, high-quality sources addressing the conceptual evolution of competitiveness.

The methodology includes:

- A literature review of scientific articles, books, institutional reports, and regulatory documents from 1899 to 2023.
- A chronological and comparative analysis of the main theories and definitions of competitiveness.
- A classification of approaches into three major schools of thought: firm-centered, environment-centered, and the systemic perspective.
- The inclusion of analytical tables that systematize key concepts, authors, and theoretical dimensions.
- The data used in this study come exclusively from secondary sources:
- Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO, and Google Scholar.
- Reports and publications from international organizations (OECD, ECLAC, WEF, IMD).
- Previous studies on SMEs, competitive strategy, innovation, and productivity.

The information is organized into thematic tables (e.g., theories by year and author, key definitions) developed by the authors based on the literature review.

The following criteria were applied:

Databases and Sources

The literature review was conducted using recognized academic and institutional databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and specialized repositories such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), International Institute for Management Development (IMD), and institutional reports. Books and seminal theoretical works by leading authors were also considered.

Keywords and Search Strategy

Search terms combined concepts related to competitiveness and its evolution, such as: "competitiveness theory," "evolution of competitiveness," "systemic competitiveness," "competitive advantage," "innovation and competitiveness," "digital competitiveness," and "sustainable

competitiveness." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search and retrieve articles addressing both classical and contemporary approaches.

Time Frame

The review covered publications from 1899 to 2023, starting with early theoretical contributions (e.g., Efficiency Theory) and extending to recent approaches incorporating digitalization, sustainability, and resilience.

Inclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed articles, books, and authoritative institutional reports.

Studies explicitly defining or conceptualizing competitiveness or proposing theoretical models.

Literature addressing macro (national), meso (sectoral), and micro (firm-level) perspectives.

Works that provide evidence or conceptual arguments relevant to understanding the chronological evolution of competitiveness.

Exclusion Criteria

Non-scholarly sources (e.g., opinion pieces, blog entries).

Studies exclusively focused on operational performance or financial results without theoretical contributions to the concept of competitiveness.

Articles lacking explicit discussion of competitiveness as a construct.

Selection Process

The initial search yielded a broad set of references, which were screened based on titles and abstracts. Full-text reviews were conducted for works meeting the inclusion criteria. Redundant or overlapping sources were eliminated. The final selection comprised seminal theoretical contributions, institutional frameworks, and contemporary approaches that collectively illustrate the chronological development of competitiveness theories and definitions.

DEVELOPMENT

Competitiveness has been extensively addressed in the literature as a complex and multifaceted construct, supported by various theories that seek to explain its nature and determining factors. From a theoretical standpoint, competitiveness has been conceived as a multidimensional concept, with interpretations that vary according to the level of analysis. As such, it can be applied at global, national, regional, sectoral, and even individual levels, allowing for its use in both macroeconomic studies and research focused on specific business units.

Academic interest in competitiveness began to intensify in the late 1970s and was consolidated during the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of strategic theories centered on competitive advantage and organizational performance. Since then, a vast body of knowledge has emerged, addressing this concept from multiple perspectives, including business strategy, productive economics, and territorial development.

The concept of competitiveness has been extensively studied since the second half of the 20th century, becoming a central theme in business strategy literature. In the 1970s, authors such as Ansoff (1976) described it as the result of a strategic interaction between a firm and its environment, emphasizing the

coherence between activities, products, and markets. Andrews (1977) offered an organizational perspective, defining strategy as a pattern of objectives and policies aimed at achieving goals, and introduced the SWOT analysis. Similarly, Miles et al. (1978) noted that effective strategy is configured as an adaptive response to a changing market environment.

In the 1980s, Michael Porter revolutionized the study of business competitiveness by introducing his theory of the five competitive forces, which laid the foundation for understanding industry dynamics and strategic positioning (Porter, 1980; 1985). Concurrently, other scholars broadened the approach: Scott (1985) introduced the concept at a national level; Hatten (1987) linked it to strategic management; and Miller (1986) and Mintzberg (1987) explored internal dimensions such as innovation, differentiation, and cost control.

In the 1990s, competitiveness became an increasingly complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Porter (1990) redefined his focus on a nation's ability to generate sustainable productivity, while Kotler (1992) proposed competitive strategies based on a firm's market position. Krugman (1994) provided a critical view, arguing that national competitiveness cannot be assessed using the same logic as corporate competition, since international trade often yields mutual benefits rather than zero-sum outcomes. Other authors, such as Johnson et al. (1993), Ivancevich et al. (1997), and Lizcano et al. (1999), enriched the discussion by emphasizing environmental factors, productivity, and strategic actors.

In the 21st century, the approach to competitiveness has shifted toward a more comprehensive and inclusive vision, especially regarding small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Studies such as that of Aragón et al. (2001) highlight the importance of managerial training as a driver of competitive improvement. Likewise, the model proposed by Man, Lau, and Chan (2002) identifies internal resources, external environment, and entrepreneurial characteristics as key determinants of SME competitiveness.

This review aims to explore the theoretical evolution of the concept of competitiveness, its most influential approaches, and its application at various levels of analysis, with particular emphasis on the SME context. Through a chronological analysis of major academic contributions, the goal is to provide a solid conceptual framework for future research and strategies aimed at improving business competitive performance.

The study of competitiveness in SMEs has become increasingly relevant due to the specific characteristics that distinguish these organizations from large corporations. Man et al. (2002) point out that SMEs differ significantly in organizational structure, responsiveness to environmental changes, management styles, and their ways of interacting with other entities. These differences require tailored analytical approaches, as competitiveness models designed for large firms often fail to capture the short-term dynamics of SMEs.

In 2004, the World Economic Forum (WEF) institutionalized the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), establishing an international benchmark for evaluating national competitiveness. Since then, annual reports have monitored economic progress and setbacks across countries (WEF, 2021). Nonetheless, Casalet (2004) warns that the limited adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) among SMEs creates structural imbalances, widening the gap they face when competing in globalized environments.

Other studies, such as that of Greenwald et al. (2005), identify recurring constraints that limit SME competitiveness, including small firm size, limited management capacity, and most critically, restricted access to market intelligence. In response to saturated traditional markets, Kim et al. (2005) introduced the Blue Ocean Strategy, which encourages the creation of untapped market spaces where competition

becomes irrelevant. This strategy is built on four principles: creating new demand, focusing on the big picture, reaching beyond existing customers, and ensuring commercial viability.

In the 2010s, the concept of competitiveness expanded toward more operational and sector-specific approaches. Ahmedova (2015) defined it as efficiency in production, service delivery, and marketing strategies, with an emphasis on low administrative costs and consumer preference. Rubio et al. (2016) framed it as a firm's ability to outperform competitors and achieve superior performance. Meanwhile, Schwab (2018) developed a structured competitiveness model comprising 114 indicators grouped into twelve pillars, allowing for a more detailed analysis at national and regional levels.

The objective of this article is to offer a critical review of these theoretical approaches, analyzing the evolution and various interpretations of competitiveness over time.

THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS

The following section presents an analysis of the chronological evolution of theories related to competitiveness. To provide a theoretical framework for the concept of competitiveness, the main theories are presented chronologically in Table 1.

Table 1

Theories of Competitiveness

Year	Name of the Theory	Concept	Author
1899	Theory of Efficiency	Focuses on competitive advantage, which is manifested through innovations within the company, driving economic growth.	John M. Clark
1957	Market Behavior Theory	Identifies six potential sources of a company's competitiveness: market segmentation, promotional communication, distribution channels, product development, process improvement, and product innovation.	Wroe Alderson
1959	Resource and Capabilities Theory	Considers a company as a collection of resources and a repository of knowledge; the more resources it possesses, the more individual competencies it has to offer various services.	Pen Rose
1979	Economies of Scale Theory	Indicates that economies of scale allow a country to specialize in the production of certain goods, resulting in cost savings.	Paul Krugman, Kevin Lancaster
1980	Competitive Advantage Theory	Rooted in the concept of productivity and its determinants within the company. It focuses on the value a company creates for its customers that exceeds the costs.	Porter, M
1980	Management Theory	Highlights the four-factor model for nations competitive advantage, known as the diamond model. Competitiveness depends on long-term productivity, which requires a business environment that supports continuous innovation in products, processes, and management.	Porter

1990	Diamond Model of Competitiveness	National or regional competitiveness depends on four determinants: factor conditions (e.g., natural resources, infrastructure), demand conditions (a sophisticated and demanding local market), related and supporting industries (presence of competitive suppliers and sectors), and firm strategy, structure, and rivalry (local competition conditions).	Porter
1990	Endogenous Growth Theory	This theory suggests that investment in human capital, innovation, and knowledge is crucial for sustainable economic growth, and thus for competitiveness.	Romer
1991	Resource-Based View (RBV)	A firm's competitiveness is based on its unique resources and capabilities. The theory has evolved to include dynamic capabilities, referring to a firm's ability to adapt, integrate, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address changing environments.	Barney
1993	Treacy-Wiersema Theory	This theory proposes strategies different from Porter, identifying companies that deliver superior value through value disciplines: operational excellence, customer intimacy, and product leadership.	Treacy and Wiersema
1993	Industrial Organization Theory	Focuses on the interaction between internal organization and input markets, highlighting innovation and technology adoption as strategic elements in competitive market distribution.	Jean Tirole
1995	Innovation-Based Competitiveness Theory	Emphasizes the central role of innovation in competitiveness. Firms and economies that invest in R&D and adopt new technologies tend to be more competitive in the long term.	Freeman
1996	Systemic Competitiveness Theory	Argues that the creation of dynamic competitive advantages in industrial sectors is based on the interaction among the state, firms, intermediary organizations, and society across four analytical levels: meta (culture, values, social norms), macro (national economic policies), meso (infrastructure, technology, education), and micro (individual firms and their ability to compete).	Esser, Klaus
1998	Cluster Theory	Suggests that economic organization and policy should be understood through clusters, which better reflect economic rationality. Porter positioned clusters as a central unit of analysis for competitiveness.	Porter, M
2000	Triple Helix Model	Regional competitiveness depends on the interaction between three spheres: universities, industry, and government. Innovation and economic development result from collaboration among these actors.	Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff
2000	Social Capital Theory	Argues that social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity within a community can significantly contribute to competitiveness. Communities with high social capital tend to perform better economically.	Putnam

2005	Blue Ocean Strategy Theory	Proposes that companies can achieve greater competitiveness not by battling in existing markets ('red oceans'), but by creating new, uncontested market spaces ('blue oceans') where competition is irrelevant.	Kim and Mauborgne
2013	Inclusive and Sustainable Competitiveness Theory	Promoted by the World Economic Forum, this theory holds that competitiveness should include social equity and environmental sustainability alongside economic growth.	World Economic Forum
2014	Institutional Entrepreneurship Theory	Explores how institutional entrepreneur individuals or groups who drive change within institutions can influence competitiveness through human agency and institutional transformation.	Royston Greenwood and Roy Suddaby
2014	Innovation and Entrepreneurship-Based Competitiveness Theory	Highlights the role of innovation and entrepreneurship as key drivers of regional and national competitiveness. Regions that foster innovation and support entrepreneurs tend to be more competitive.	Erik Stam and Tom Elfring
2014	Knowledge Economy Theory	Introduces the concept of 'smart specialization' within the knowledge economy. Suggests that regions should identify and develop areas of specialization based on their unique comparative advantages and capabilities to enhance competitiveness.	Dominique Foray
2014	Dynamic Capabilities-Based Competitiveness Theory	Focuses on a company's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies in rapidly changing environments. Adaptability and continuous innovation are essential for maintaining competitiveness.	David Teece
2017	Organizational Resilience Theory	Posits that competitive organizations are those capable of anticipating, preparing for, responding to, and adapting to incremental changes and sudden disruptions. Resilience is seen as a strategic asset.	David Denyer
2020	Digital Economy Competitiveness Theory	Emphasizes the critical role of adopting advanced digital technologies such as AI, big data, and IoT maintaining competitiveness. Digital competencies and technological innovation are fundamental.	Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee
2020	Competitive Resilience Theory	Focuses on the ability of firms and economies to swiftly adapt to crises and unexpected changes. Key components include supply chain diversification and agile responsiveness.	Stephanie Duchek
2020	Open and Collaborative Innovation Theory	Suggests that collaboration among companies, universities, governments, and other entities fosters innovation and boosts competitiveness. Innovation ecosystems are crucial for developing new ideas and technologies collectively.	Henry Chesbrough
2020	Talent-Based Competitiveness Theory	Stresses the importance of attracting and retaining highly skilled talent to maintain competitiveness. Continuous investment in skill development is essential to keep pace with market and technological changes.	Klaus Schwab / World Economic Forum

2020	Experience Economy Theory	Holds that delivering superior experiences to both customers and employees can serve as a major competitive differentiator. Companies should focus on creating memorable experiences to gain market advantage.	Joseph Pine and James Gilmore
2021	Sustainable Competitiveness Theory	Proposes that environmental and social sustainability must be integrated into competitive strategies. Circular economy models and net-zero emission goals enhance competitiveness by addressing global concerns.	Michael Porter and Mark Kramer
2021	Data-Driven Competitiveness Theory	Emphasizes the strategic use of data and advanced analytics in decision-making. Artificial intelligence and data governance are central to this approach.	Viktor Mayer-Schanberger and Thomas Ramge
2021	Equity and Inclusion in Competitiveness Theory	Asserts that equity and inclusion are essential components of sustainable competitiveness. Policies that promote equal access to education and employment enhance innovation and productivity.	Mariana Mazzucato

Source: Own elaboration based on the literature review.

Over the course of more than a century, various theories have addressed the concept of competitiveness, from its earliest formulations in 1899 to more contemporary approaches in 2021. Many of these proposals have focused specifically on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), recognizing their key role in productive systems. In this context, a compilation of key definitions presented by different authors has been made, as shown in Table 2.

The theoretical analysis reveals the existence of three major schools of thought that interpret competitiveness from different perspectives. The first views the firm as the primary agent responsible for generating its own competitive development. The second emphasizes the influence of the external environment, understanding competitiveness as the result of an integrated system in which external factors are decisive. Finally, the third approach—systemic competitiveness—proposes a holistic vision in which the interaction between meta, macro, meso, and micro levels is essential for achieving sustained competitive performance.

From this perspective, the article contributes to the theoretical body of the Systemic Competitiveness Theory by focusing on how microeconomic factors interact within a broader system.

Additionally, Table 2 presents a representative set of definitions of the concept of competitiveness, particularly from the period when the term began to gain theoretical and practical relevance: the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Table 2

Definitions of the Concept of Competitiveness.

Year	Authors	Definition of Competitiveness
1984	Cohen, Teece, Tyson and Zysman	Development of superior efficiency and an economy's ability to increase output in high-productivity activities, which in turn can generate high real wage levels.
1985	Report of the Select Committee on Foreign Trade	It is synonymous with the long-term profit performance of a firm and its ability to compensate employees and provide superior returns to its owners.

1985	Thurow	Competitiveness is a matter of positioning firms in international markets rather than focusing solely on productivity growth.
1985	Special Committee of the House of Lords on International Trade	A company is competitive when it can produce higher quality products and services at lower costs than both domestic and international competitors.
1989	Haguenauer	Defines industrial competitiveness as the ability of an industry to produce goods with specific quality standards required by particular markets, using resources at levels comparable to those in similar industries worldwide.
1990	Porter	The company's ability to attract and retain activity, which increases the prospects of achieving a competitive advantage. Productivity is the fundamental element of a country's competitiveness.
1990	Sharples and Milhan	The ability to deliver goods and services at the time, place, and manner preferred by customers, at better prices than other suppliers, while at least covering the opportunity cost of the resources used.
1994	Feurer, R. and Chaharbaghi, K.	Competitiveness is relative, not absolute. It can only be sustained if an appropriate balance is maintained among various, sometimes conflicting, factors.
1994	Esser, Klaus; Wolfgang Hillebrand; Dirk Messner; Jörg Meyer-Stamer	They introduced the concept of systemic competitiveness, emphasizing that the competitiveness of an economy rests on goal-oriented measures articulated across four system levels: meta, macro, meso, and micro.
1995	Industry Canada	A company is competitive if it is profitable, meaning its average cost does not exceed the market price of its product. For Latin American SMEs, competitiveness implies their costs do not exceed the average costs of competitors.
1995	Competitiveness Advisory Group	Competitiveness involves elements of productivity, efficiency, and profitability. It is a powerful means to achieve high living standards and increased social welfare—a tool for achieving goals.
1998	Buckley, P.J. et al.	Competitiveness includes both efficiency (achieving goals at the lowest possible cost) and effectiveness (having the right goals). It encompasses both the ends and the means to achieve them.
2001	Samuelson and Nordhaus	Competitiveness refers to the extent to which a nation's goods can compete in the market, largely depending on the relative prices and quality of domestic and foreign goods and services.
2001	Dussel	It is the process by which companies efficiently use their functional areas to enter international markets with high-quality products.
2002	Man, Lau and Chan	The Man Model identifies three key determinants of SME competitiveness: internal (firm-specific) factors, external environment, and entrepreneurial activity. It also considers three dimensions of competitiveness (potential, process, performance) and four attributes (long-term orientation, controllability, relativity, and dynamism).
2003	Quiroga	Proposed a mathematical model to determine SME competitiveness by identifying critical factors and variables, including both controllable internal elements and external influences on performance.
2005	Romo and Musik	Competitiveness stems from superior productivity, either by achieving lower costs than national or international rivals or by offering higher-value products.

2005	Greenwald and Kahn	Competitiveness refers to the ability of companies to compete for markets, resources, and revenue.
2005	Lall, Albaladejo, and Mesquita	Companies compete to capture markets and resources, measuring competitiveness through relative market share or profitability, using competitive strategies to improve performance.
2005	Solleiro and Castañon	Competitiveness also depends on the quality of a firm's interactions with various internal and external factors.
2006	Rubio and Aragón	The key to competitiveness lies in critical resources—those that allow sustainable competitive advantages over time and capture the rents generated. Identifying these in SMEs is essential.
2006	De la Cruz, Morales, and Carrasco	Developing capabilities within a sector and its firms boosts the competitiveness of a range of products or services and significantly influences their growth and differentiation potential.
2007	Sánchez	Competitiveness is the ability of a company to enter, consolidate, or expand its market share, expressed through factors like management skills, use of installed capacity, and optimization of financial, human, and material resources.
2009	Mathews	The ability of an organization—public or private, for-profit or nonprofit—to achieve and sustain advantages that help consolidate and improve its position within its socioeconomic environment.
2009	Martínez et al.	Suggests key indicators influencing competitiveness: external indicators related to the business environment, technology and innovation, human resources management, leadership capability, internationalization, and financing.
2015	Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO)	Capability to attract and retain investment and talent.
2015	International Institute for Management Development (IMD)	The ability of nations to create and maintain an environment in which companies can compete effectively.
2017	Law for the Development of Competitiveness of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises	The quality of the economic and institutional environment for sustainable private sector development and increased productivity; At the firm level, the ability to sustain and strengthen profitability and market share based on the advantages of their products or Services, and the conditions in which they are offered.
2017	Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee	Digital competitiveness refers to the capacity of economies and organizations to adopt and leverage advanced digital technologies—such as artificial intelligence, big data, and the Internet of Things (IoT)—to enhance their innovation and compete in an increasingly digital global environment.
2018	Erik Stam and Tom Elfring	Competitiveness is based on innovation and entrepreneurship, with support for entrepreneurs as key drivers of regional and national competitiveness. Fostering a favorable environment for the creation and growth of innovative businesses.
2018	Klaus Schwab / World Economic Forum	Inclusive competitiveness focuses on policies and business practices that not only promote economic growth but also enhance social equity, reduce inequality, and achieve sustainable economic development.
2019	Joseph Pine and James Gilmore	The experience economy argues that competitiveness is achieved by offering superior experiences to both customers and employees. Focusing on creating memorable experiences that differentiate a company in the market.

2020	Henry Chesbrough	Open innovation-based competitiveness refers to the ability of companies to use both internal and external ideas to advance their technology and products. Fostering collaboration among businesses, universities, and other entities to enhance innovation and competitiveness.
2020	Stephanie Duchek	Competitive resilience is defined as the capacity of organizations to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to unexpected changes and crises while maintaining their competitive advantage.
2021	Michael Porter and Mark Kramer	Sustainable competitiveness involves integrating environmental and social sustainability practices into business strategies to create long-term value for both the company and society, thereby enhancing the firm's competitive position.
2021	Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Thomas Ramge	Data-driven competitiveness is the ability of organizations to use data and advanced analytics to make informed and strategic decisions. Leveraging artificial intelligence and data governance to sustain and improve competitive advantage.

Source: Own elaboration based on the literature review.

In the review of specialized literature, competitiveness has been conceptualized by various authors as a theoretical notion of a multidimensional nature, linked to a wide range of factors and levels of analysis. Existing definitions indicate that this concept can be applied at different levels of aggregation: from the global, national, regional, and local levels to industrial sectors, specific branches of economic activity, or individual business units.

Academic interest in competitiveness intensified in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during which time it began to establish itself as a central theme in studies on strategy and economic development. Over time, a substantial body of research has emerged, exploring the concept from multiple perspectives, including its connections to competitive strategy, comparative advantage, and productivity, among other key elements.

Regarding its treatment as a dependent variable, it is important to note that definitions have progressively evolved. In its early formulations—before the term “competitiveness” was formally adopted—studies referred to closely related concepts such as “business strategy,” “competitive strategy,” or “competitive advantage,” which laid the theoretical groundwork for the modern understanding of competitiveness.

The following section presents some of the most relevant definitions identified in the literature.

Research objective

The objective of this review article is to analyze the theoretical evolution of the concept of competitiveness by compiling and comparing the main definitions, approaches, and theories proposed by various authors from the late 19th century to the present. It aims to provide a critical systematization of the conceptual framework, with particular emphasis on its application across different levels of analysis (global, national, sectoral, and firm level), and to highlight the implications of the systemic competitiveness approach in the current context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main findings derived from the systematic review of the literature:

More than 30 key theories and approaches to competitiveness were identified, spanning the period from 1899 to 2021. These have been systematized into chronological tables highlighting the author, year, concept, and level of analysis.

The definitions of competitiveness vary according to the disciplinary perspective (economics, management, innovation, regional development) and the level of application (macro, meso, micro, meta). The concept of competitiveness has undergone significant transformation throughout history, shaped by different economic, managerial, and technological paradigms. Its evolution can be understood through a chronological review of the main theories and approaches that have contributed to the development of this construct.

Early Foundations (1899–1959)

The origins of competitiveness studies date back to Clark's Theory of Efficiency (1899), which associated competitive advantage with innovations within the firm as drivers of economic growth. Subsequently, Alderson (1957) introduced the Market Behavior Theory, identifying six potential sources of competitiveness: market segmentation, promotional communication, distribution channels, product development, process improvement, and product innovation. Shortly after, Penrose (1959) advanced Resource and Capabilities Theory, conceptualizing firms as collections of resources and knowledge. This perspective emphasized that the possession and strategic deployment of resources enhances a firm's ability to offer diverse services.

Structural and Productivity Approaches (1970s–1980s)

During the late 1970s, attention shifted toward macroeconomic aspects with the Economies of Scale Theory by Krugman and Lancaster (1979), which suggested that specialization in the production of certain goods reduces costs and enhances competitiveness. Entering the 1980s, Michael Porter revolutionized the field with the Competitive Advantage Theory (1980), focusing on productivity as the primary determinant of competitiveness and underscoring the value firms create for customers beyond production costs. This period also introduced the Management Theory, emphasizing long-term productivity and the importance of an innovation-driven business environment.

National Competitiveness and Strategic Perspectives (1990s)

The 1990s marked a turning point with the Diamond Model of Competitiveness (Porter, 1990), which analyzed competitiveness at the national and regional levels based on four determinants: factor conditions, demand conditions, related industries, and firm strategy and rivalry. Concurrently, Romer's Endogenous Growth Theory (1990) highlighted the strategic role of investment in human capital, innovation, and knowledge for sustainable growth. At the firm level, the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) positioned unique resources and capabilities as the foundation of competitive advantage, later evolving into the concept of dynamic capabilities. Additional contributions during this decade included Treacy and Wiersema's Value Disciplines (1993), which proposed differentiation strategies based on operational excellence, customer intimacy, and product leadership, as well as Tirole's Industrial Organization Theory (1993), which emphasized innovation and technology adoption.

Innovation and Systemic Approaches (1995–2005)

From the mid-1990s onward, literature increasingly recognized innovation as a critical driver of competitiveness. Freeman (1995) proposed the Innovation-Based Competitiveness Theory, linking R&D investment to long-term advantage. Similarly, Esser et al. (1996) introduced the Systemic Competitiveness Theory, which integrated interactions among the state, firms, and society across four levels: meta (values and culture), macro (economic policies), meso (infrastructure and technology), and micro (firm-level capabilities). In the late 1990s, Porter (1998) introduced the Cluster Theory,

emphasizing the role of geographic and sectoral agglomerations in fostering competitive advantage. By the early 2000s, models such as the Triple Helix (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000) and Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) underscored the importance of collaboration between universities, industry, government, and the role of trust and social networks in enhancing competitiveness.

Strategic Innovation and Sustainability (2005–2014)

The early 21st century introduced approaches oriented toward market creation and inclusive development. Kim and Mauborgne's Blue Ocean Strategy (2005) advocated for creating uncontested market spaces rather than competing in saturated markets. By 2013, the Inclusive and Sustainable Competitiveness Theory (World Economic Forum) emphasized incorporating social equity and environmental sustainability into competitiveness frameworks. In 2014, multiple theories emerged, including Institutional Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Entrepreneurship-Based Competitiveness, and Knowledge Economy Theory, all highlighting innovation, entrepreneurship, and smart specialization as cornerstones of competitive advantage. During the same period, Teece (2014) further developed the concept of Dynamic Capabilities, stressing adaptability and continuous innovation.

Contemporary Perspectives (2017–present)

Recent theories reflect the influence of globalization, digital transformation, and societal challenges. Denyer's Organizational Resilience Theory (2017) identified resilience as a strategic asset for competitiveness in volatile environments. From 2020 onwards, the literature expanded toward digitalization and collaborative innovation, with theories such as Digital Economy Competitiveness (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2020), Open and Collaborative Innovation (Chesbrough, 2020), and Talent-Based Competitiveness (Schwab, 2020). Other approaches emphasized experience as a competitive differentiator (Pine & Gilmore, 2020) and the strategic importance of agility during crises (Duchek's Competitive Resilience Theory, 2020). More recent contributions include Sustainable Competitiveness Theory (Porter & Kramer, 2021), Data-Driven Competitiveness (Mayer-Schanberger & Ramge, 2021), and Equity and Inclusion in Competitiveness (Mazzucato, 2021), which integrate sustainability, technological innovation, and social inclusion as fundamental dimensions of competitiveness in the 21st century.

The concept of competitiveness has evolved considerably over time, reflecting changes in economic theory, business strategy, and global dynamics. The following section synthesizes key definitions provided by prominent scholars, institutions, and policy frameworks from 1984 to the present, highlighting conceptual shifts and emerging dimensions.

Early Perspectives: Productivity and Market Positioning (1984–1990)

Initial definitions centered on productivity and efficiency as fundamental drivers of competitiveness. Cohen, Teece, Tyson, and Zysman (1984) emphasized that competitiveness stems from superior efficiency and an economy's capacity to expand high-productivity activities, which enable higher real wages. Similarly, the 1985 Report of the Select Committee on Foreign Trade equated competitiveness with a firm's long-term profitability and its ability to reward employees and generate superior returns for owners. In the same year, Thurow (1985) argued that competitiveness is primarily about positioning firms within international markets rather than focusing solely on productivity. Concurrently, the Special Committee of the House of Lords on International Trade (1985) defined a competitive company as one capable of producing superior-quality goods at lower costs compared to domestic and international rivals.

Expanding to Industry and Systemic Views (1989–1995)

By the late 1980s, competitiveness broadened to include industry-level considerations. Haguenaer (1989) conceptualized industrial competitiveness as the ability to meet specific market quality standards while maintaining resource efficiency comparable to global peers. Porter (1990) reinforced productivity as the essence of national competitiveness, framing it as the capacity to attract and retain activities that foster competitive advantage. Complementary definitions, such as that of Sharples and Milhan (1990), focused on timely and cost-effective delivery of goods and services while covering opportunity costs. During the mid-1990s, perspectives shifted toward relative and systemic dimensions. Feurer and Chaharbaghi (1994) asserted that competitiveness is relative and sustainable only when conflicting factors are balanced. Similarly, Esser et al. (1994) introduced the concept of systemic competitiveness, emphasizing the articulation of meta, macro, meso, and micro levels in shaping economic performance.

Operationalization and Measurement (1995–2005)

Institutional definitions emerged in the late 1990s, such as Industry Canada (1995), which linked competitiveness to profitability—ensuring costs remain below market prices—and the Competitiveness Advisory Group (1995), which associated it with productivity, efficiency, and profitability as tools for achieving social welfare. Buckley et al. (1998) added a dual perspective by integrating efficiency (cost control) and effectiveness (goal alignment). Entering the 2000s, scholars sought to operationalize competitiveness for SMEs and national economies. Samuelson and Nordhaus (2001) framed competitiveness as the ability of a country's goods to compete internationally, influenced by relative prices and quality. Dussel (2001) emphasized the role of efficient functional areas for internationalization, while Man, Lau, and Chan (2002) proposed a model identifying internal, external, and entrepreneurial determinants, as well as dimensions like potential, process, and performance. Subsequent contributions by Quiroga (2003) and Romo and Musik (2005) highlighted productivity and strategic cost reduction as key components, whereas Solleiro and Castañón (2005) underlined the importance of interactions between internal and external factors.

Strategic Resources and Capability-Based Views (2006–2009)

From the mid-2000s, definitions increasingly focused on resources and dynamic capabilities. Rubio and Aragón (2006) argued that critical resources sustaining competitive advantages are central to competitiveness, particularly for SMEs. De la Cruz, Morales, and Carrasco (2006) extended this to sectoral capability development, while Sánchez (2007) defined competitiveness in terms of expanding market share through managerial skills and resource optimization. Broader interpretations emerged with Mathews (2009), framing competitiveness as the sustained ability of organizations—regardless of sector—to secure advantages within their socioeconomic environment. Martínez et al. (2009) introduced indicators encompassing technology, human resource management, leadership, and internationalization as determinants of competitiveness.

Institutional and Global Frameworks (2015–2018)

In the 2010s, institutional definitions became more holistic. The Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO, 2015) defined competitiveness as the capacity to attract and retain investment and talent, while the International Institute for Management Development (IMD, 2015) emphasized creating environments conducive to business performance. The Law for the Development of Competitiveness of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (2017) combined institutional and firm-level perspectives, linking competitiveness to sustainable private sector growth, profitability, and favorable market conditions. Meanwhile, digitalization emerged as a key determinant, as Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2017) introduced the concept of digital competitiveness, focusing on the adoption of advanced technologies.

Simultaneously, Stam and Elfring (2018) and Schwab (2018) integrated innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusiveness into competitiveness frameworks.

Contemporary Approaches: Digitalization, Sustainability, and Resilience (2019–2021)

Recent definitions underscore multidimensional and adaptive capabilities. Pine and Gilmore (2019) introduced the experience economy, emphasizing memorable customer and employee experiences as differentiators. Chesbrough (2020) highlighted open innovation and collaborative ecosystems as enablers of competitiveness. Ducheck (2020) proposed competitive resilience, referring to the ability to anticipate and adapt to crises. Sustainability gained prominence with Porter and Kramer (2021), who advocated for integrating environmental and social practices into corporate strategy, while Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge (2021) introduced data-driven competitiveness, stressing advanced analytics and AI for decision-making.

Three major theoretical schools are identified:

Microeconomic approaches, which emphasize the internal resources and capabilities of the firm.

Structural approaches, which underline the role of the institutional, economic, and technological environment.

The systemic competitiveness approach, which integrates the meta, macro, meso, and micro levels within an interdependent logic.

Since 2020, new concepts have emerged, such as sustainable, digital, inclusive, and data-driven competitiveness, reflecting an update of the competitive paradigm in response to social, environmental, and technological challenges.

The results show that the concept of competitiveness has evolved from being a notion centered on economic efficiency to a much more complex and interdisciplinary approach. The rise of the systemic perspective reveals that competitiveness cannot be explained solely by internal business decisions, but is deeply influenced by the institutional framework, public policies, technological development, and organizational culture.

Moreover, the most recent literature proposes a strategic redefinition: it is no longer just about competing on price or productivity, but about incorporating values such as sustainability, resilience, and equity. This shift presents new challenges for SMEs, which require differentiated public policies and adaptive strategies to integrate into global markets.

CONCLUSION

Competitiveness is an evolutionary, dynamic, and multidimensional concept, whose interpretation has significantly changed depending on the historical context and global challenges.

There is a substantial theoretical richness, but also conceptual dispersion, which is why this review contributes to organizing and classifying the predominant approaches in literature.

The systemic competitiveness approach offers an integrative perspective that helps to understand the links between structural and organizational factors and is particularly useful for analyzing SMEs in complex environments.

Current trends point toward a more human-centered and sustainable view of competitiveness, which calls for rethinking traditional business success indicators and adopting models that incorporate innovation, social impact, and digitalization.

This study makes a significant contribution to the theoretical and practical understanding of business competitiveness by integrating and extending established frameworks. First, it reinforces the principles of the Systemic Competitiveness Theory, which conceptualizes competitiveness as the outcome of interactions between internal and external factors, positioning the firm as an integral component of a broader socioeconomic system. Additionally, the findings are consistent with the Factor Endowment Theory, emphasizing that the efficient combination and allocation of available resources are critical for improving organizational performance and sustaining competitive advantage.

From a conceptual perspective, the study incorporates elements from prior models, notably Schwab's (2018) Global Competitiveness Index, which organizes competitiveness into 12 pillars grouped under three sub-indices: Basic Requirements (BR), Efficiency Enhancers (EE), and Innovation and Sophistication (IS). These dimensions are explicitly linked to the variables examined in this research, providing a structured and comprehensive analytical approach. Furthermore, the Man Model (2002) is integrated to capture competitiveness determinants specific to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This model highlights three critical factors: firm-specific characteristics, external environmental conditions, and the role of the entrepreneur—an aspect of particular relevance to micro and small enterprises in the steel sector.

The practical implications of these findings are twofold. For industry stakeholders, particularly owners and managers of micro and small steel enterprises, the results offer a conceptual and empirical basis for designing strategies aimed at enhancing competitiveness through resource optimization, innovation adoption, and systemic interaction with external actors. For policy makers and support institutions, the study provides evidence-based insights to inform the development of targeted programs and initiatives that strengthen competitiveness at both firm and sectoral levels. Additionally, the conceptual synthesis presented here serves as a valuable reference for preparing analytical reports and guiding strategic decision-making processes in the steel industry context.

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