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RECONCEPTUALIZING SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVENESS: TOWARD A STAKEHOLDER-BASED AND MULTI-DOMAIN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction. The growing complexity of contemporary organizational environments increasingly challenges traditional market-centered interpretations of competitiveness. Intensifying international competition, rapid digitalization, changes in the institutional environment, environmental challenges, and the growing importance of stakeholder interactions create new requirements for organizations' ability to maintain sustainable positions in the long term.

Traditionally, competitiveness has been considered primarily through the prism of market efficiency, productivity, the ability to create competitive advantages, and the achievement of superior economic performance compared to competitors [37; 66]. However, modern approaches extend beyond the purely market-oriented interpretation of competitiveness.

The development of the sustainable development concept, along with the dissemination of ESG-oriented approaches and the Sustainable Development Goals, has intensified interest in the long-term dimensions of competitiveness associated with economic outcomes along with organizations' ability to adapt to environmental changes, maintain stakeholder legitimacy, and account for the social and environmental consequences of their activities [78].

In contemporary academic literature, the concept of sustainable competitiveness is being used with increasing frequency. At the same time, existing

approaches to its interpretation remain rather heterogeneous. In different studies, sustainable competitiveness is understood as:

– the ability to ensure sustainable economic growth;
– long-term productivity;
– environmentally oriented competitiveness;
– the capacity to preserve the well-being of future generations;
– the integration of ESG principles into organizational management systems.

This indicates the need for further theoretical conceptualization of sustainable competitiveness and clarification of its content under conditions of increasing complexity in the modern competitive environment.

This chapter analyzes the evolution of approaches to the understanding of competitiveness and sustainable competitiveness and proposes a stakeholder-oriented interpretation of sustainable competitiveness as the ability of an organization to maintain adaptive and legitimate positions within a system of multidimensional stakeholder interactions.

The proposed framework contributes to the contemporary competitiveness discourse in four principal ways.

First, it introduces ontological boundaries of sustainable competitiveness by distinguishing between elemental competitive objects and adaptive systems capable of sustaining competitiveness over time. Second, it conceptualizes sustainable competitiveness as a multidomain adaptive capability emerging across stakeholder-derived domains rather than exclusively within product-market interactions. Third, it expands stakeholder-based interpretations of competitiveness by incorporating legitimacy, governance, and adaptive capacity into the structure of competitive analysis. Finally, the chapter introduces the concept of future generations as a normative meta-stakeholder institutionally represented through sustainability governance frameworks such as the SDGs.

1. Morphological analysis of the competitiveness concept

The acceleration of globalization processes and the increasing turbulence of the socio-economic system, occurring against the backdrop of crisis phenomena in the global economy, lead to the intensification of competition in the world market. This determines the growing attention of both the managerial and academic communities to issues related to enhancing the competitiveness of economic systems at various levels, including enterprises, industries, countries, and supranational entities.

At the same time, discussions regarding the definition of competitiveness and its inherent properties still continue, which complicates the development of effective “recipes” for its enhancement. Some scholars even argue that competitiveness can legitimately be attributed to an enterprise, whereas the application of this concept to such an object as a country is considered inappropriate. The key metric for a nation is productivity, not "competitiveness" in the mercantilist sense [63]. Michael Porter argues that the concept of competitiveness does have a valid and crucial meaning at the national level, which he firmly grounds in productivity. He directly rejects the idea that the concept is meaningless for nations [68].

So, despite the widespread use of the category of competitiveness in economic science, contemporary literature still lacks a unified approach to defining its essence. Existing interpretations differ in their ontological foundations, comparative logic, and understanding of the outcomes of competitive interaction. So researchers, in fact, describe different aspects of competitiveness as a phenomenon rather than different interpretations of the same concept.

To systematize existing approaches, this study applies the method of morphological analysis. This method enables the structuring of a complex concept through the identification of recurring semantic elements and the comparison of different variants of their interpretation. Unlike conventional comparative analysis of definitions, the morphological approach makes it possible to reveal the internal

structure of the concept and identify the dominant logics underlying its scientific interpretation.

The analysis covers definitions of competitiveness presented in academic publications, economic dictionaries, and international institutional sources. For the purposes of systematization, the following morphological categories were used:

– core characteristic of competitiveness;
– basis of comparison;
– goal or result of competitiveness.

Morphological analysis of the competitiveness is represented in table 1.

The conducted analysis demonstrates that most definitions can be grouped into several conceptual directions.

The first group interprets competitiveness as a set of properties, characteristics, or parameters of an object. These definitions emphasize compliance with certain requirements or the existence of characteristics ensuring the successful functioning of an object within a competitive environment. This group includes the definitions proposed by Blyzniuk S. V. [3], the Encyclopedic Dictionary of a Businessperson [9], Tiepoh M. and Burns M. [76], as well as the World Economic Forum [79]. Within these interpretations, competitiveness is viewed primarily as a characteristic of a state or as a combination of factors determining the position of an object.

The second group of definitions interprets competitiveness as the ability to compete, rival, or achieve advantages. Such an approach is characteristic of the definitions proposed by Voloshchuk I. P. [6], Khaminich S. Yu. [25], Cambridge Dictionary [48], Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries [50], and Longman Dictionary [49]. The focus here is placed on the ability of a subject to function successfully under competitive conditions, achieve superiority over other participants, or maintain competitive positions.

Table 1

Morphological analysis of the competitiveness concept

Author	Definition	Core characteristic	Basis of comparison	Goal or result
Blyzniuk S. V. [3, p. 202–203]	The set of properties of an object that are necessary and sufficient for the object to be in demand in a specific market at a specified time, alongside other similar objects or objects that satisfy similar needs.	Set of properties	Other similar objects	Demand in market
Cambridge dictionary [48]	The fact of being able to compete successfully with other companies, countries, organizations, etc.	Ability to compete successfully	Competitors	Success in competition
Encyclopedic Dictionary of a Businessperson [9]	The degree of correspondence of an object at any given moment to the requirements of the chosen market in terms of technical, economic, and other characteristics.	Degree of correspondence	Market requirements	Market suitability
Hatzichronoglou T. (OECD) [58, p. 20]	The ability of companies, industries, regions, nations or supranational regions to generate, while being and remaining exposed to international competition, relatively high factor income and factor employment levels on a sustainable basis	Ability to generate income and employment	International competition	Sustainable development
Ilchenko S., Gryshchenko V., Gryshchenko I. [59, p. 137]	Complex indicator that covers a set of certain characteristics of the object under analysis, such as market share, productivity, and innovation capacity compared to an existing or imaginary benchmark	Complex indicator	Benchmark	Market effectiveness
Khaminich S. Yu. [4, p. 13]	The ability to compete in achieving identical goals, in the pursuit of efficient use of resources and goods, to occupy an advantageous position in the market; the ability to adapt to changes in market conditions by satisfying specific social needs and increasing the efficiency of production and economic activity.	Ability to compete and adapt	Competitors	Efficient resource use and market position
Kotlyk A. V. [12, p. 107]	The capacity of an object to satisfy the interests of the subjects making a choice under conditions of competition	Capacity to satisfy interests	Choice under competition	Consumer preference
Longman dictionary [49]	the ability of a company, country, or a product to compete with others	Ability to compete	Others	Competition capability

Author	Definition	Core characteristic	Basis of comparison	Goal or result
Oxford Learner's Dictionaries [50]	The fact of people or organizations competing against each other	Ability to be equal or better	Others	Superiority
	The fact of being as good as or better than others	Ability to compete	Others	Competitive participation
Reiljan J., Hinrikus M., Ivanov A. [70, p. 10]	Position of one economic entity (country, industry, enterprise, household) in relation to other economic entities by comparing the qualities or results of activities reflecting superiority or inferiority.	Relative position	Qualities and results	Superiority / inferiority
Tiepoh M., Burns M. [76, p. 1]	Multi-dimensional feature of an economic entity, such as a firm, industry, region, or nation, operating in a market economy that describes its economic performance in relation to other entities	Multidimensional feature	Other entities	Economic performance
Voloshchuk I. P. [2, p. 15]	The ability of a subject to acquire or possess such qualities and properties that influence the success of its activities under conditions of economic rivalry.	Ability to acquire qualities	Economic rivalry	Success of activity
World Economic Forum [79]	The set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country	Institutions, policies, factors	Productivity level	Economic development

A separate group includes definitions in which competitiveness is considered through the relative position of an object compared to other entities. This approach is most clearly represented in the works of Reiljan J., Hinrikus M., and Ivanov A. [70], as well as Ilchenko S., Gryshchenko V., and Gryshchenko I. [59], where the emphasis shifts toward the comparative nature of evaluation and the measurement of superiority or effectiveness relative to a benchmark.

The morphological analysis also reveals differences in the understanding of the goals and outcomes of competitiveness. In some definitions, the key result is market success or the satisfaction of consumer needs [3; 9; 12]; in others, it is efficiency, productivity, or economic performance [59;76;79], while another group of authors associates competitiveness with achieving superiority over competitors [25; 48; 50].

Particular attention should be paid to the definition proposed by Hatzichronoglou T. [58] within the OECD framework, as it introduces an element of sustainability into the interpretation of competitiveness through the ability to ensure high levels of income and employment “on a sustainable basis.” This approach reflects the gradual transition from a short-term understanding of competitiveness toward more long-term and systemic interpretations.

Thus, the conducted morphological analysis demonstrates that existing definitions of competitiveness reflect different ontological approaches to understanding this phenomenon. Competitiveness is interpreted as:

- a set of properties;
- an ability to compete;
- a relative position;
- a characteristic of efficiency;
- a result of comparative superiority.

Consequently, competitiveness represents a multidimensional and conceptually heterogeneous category whose content depends on the selected research logic, level of analysis, and criteria of comparison. This creates the foundation for the further

development of the concept and its adaptation to contemporary conditions characterized by increasing environmental complexity, the expansion of stakeholder structures, and the growing importance of long-term sustainability.

While the general category of competitiveness primarily focuses on comparative superiority, the ability to compete, or compliance with market requirements, the concept becomes significantly more complex at the enterprise level. It is precisely at the level of the enterprise that competitiveness begins to be associated with resource management, adaptation to environmental changes, the formation of competitive advantages, organizational competencies, and interaction with various stakeholder groups.

In this regard, the morphological analysis of enterprise competitiveness makes it possible to identify the evolution of research approaches from predominantly market-oriented interpretations toward more systemic, adaptive, and long-term perspectives.

The analysis covered definitions of enterprise, firm, and organizational competitiveness presented in the works of domestic and foreign researchers. Despite differences in terminology ("firm", "enterprise", "organization"), within the framework of this study these concepts are considered conceptually close, as they describe the competitiveness of an organizational-level economic entity (table 2).

Table 2

Definitions of the enterprise competitiveness concept

Author	Definition
Adamkiewicz-Drwiłło H. G. [42]	Adapting its products to the market and competition requirements, particularly in terms of product range, quality, price as well as optimal sales channels and methods of promotion.
Ajitabh A., Momaya K. [33]	Firm's share in the competitive market.
Attila C. [34, p. 24]	A capability of a firm to sustainably fulfil its double purpose: meeting customer requirements at profit. This capability is realized through offering on the market goods and services which customers value higher than those offered by competitors.

Author	Definition
Barabas D. O. [1, p. 5]	The ability of an enterprise to adapt to the requirements of the external environment through preserving and developing existing competitive advantages and creating new ones. Competitiveness is the main prerequisite for enterprise survival and for ensuring the stability of its market position.
Bochko O. Yu., Kozhushko P. I. [5]	A complex systemic concept that embodies the competitive advantages of a particular enterprise over others in terms of the totality of all determining parameters that contribute to the consolidation of the enterprise's positions, more favorable compared to competitors, in a specific market at a specific period of time under a given influence of the operating environment.
Bondarenko H. S. [4, p. 5]	A system of interrelated elements consisting of the enterprise's internal environment, its consumers, and competitors, integrated into a unified whole for the purpose of ensuring strong competitive positions, preserving existing competitive advantages, and developing new ones.
Buckley P. J., Pass C. L., Prescott K. [43]	Firm's ability to produce and sell products and services of superior quality and lower costs than its domestic and international competitors. Competitiveness is a firm's long-run profit performance and its ability to compensate its employees and provide superior returns to its owners.
Chao-Hung W., Li-Chang H. [45]	Firm's economic strength against its rivals in the global marketplace where products, services, people and innovations move freely despite the geographical boundaries.
Fisunenko P. A. [24]	The state of an enterprise in which it is capable of competitive struggle, while the presence of competitive potential and the competitive advantages formed on its basis reflects the opportunity and ability to do so at their expense and to avoid competitive miscalculations.
Kryvenko H. V. [13, p. 4]	The ability of an enterprise to function effectively in the market while ensuring a timely response to changes in consumer needs and preferences compared to competing enterprises operating in the same market at a given point in time.
Kryvenko L. V. [14]	The difference in the development of a particular enterprise from the development of others in terms of the degree to which its goods satisfy consumer needs and the efficiency of its production activities.
Kyrchata I. M. [11, p. 6]	The ability of an enterprise to effectively utilize its competitive potential while maintaining its position in the relevant market over the long term or expanding its market share, continuously searching for and rationally implementing identified reserves of competitive potential under conditions of limited resources and external environmental influence.
Lyshchyshyn O. I. [15]	The ability of a firm to offer a product that meets specific customer requirements, namely a product of a certain quality, in the required quantity, within the necessary time frame, and under more favorable delivery conditions than competitors.
Malykhina T. I. [16, p. 6]	The real and potential ability of firms, under existing conditions, to design, manufacture, and market products that are more attractive to consumers in terms of both price and non-price characteristics than the products of their competitors.
Oxford Reference: A Dictionary of Economics [51]	The ability to compete in markets for goods or services. This is based on a combination of price and quality.

Author	Definition
Pikush Yu. P. [12, p. 8]	The ability to carry out effective and profitable activities at a certain level under competitive market conditions.
Rasulova A. M. [21, p. 7]	An indicator of the enterprise's viability in the market, characterized by the level of efficiency in utilizing its potential, the degree of adaptation to environmental conditions through competitive strategies, and the degree of satisfaction of constantly changing consumer needs.
Shershnova Z. Ye., Oborska S. V. [29]	The level of competence of an enterprise relative to competing enterprises in accumulating and utilizing production potential of a certain orientation, as well as its individual components, including technology, resources, management, personnel skills and knowledge, etc., which is reflected in such resulting indicators as product quality, profitability, productivity, and others.
Shalya O. H. [27, p. 7]	The ability of an enterprise to ensure the provision of services in a better way than competitors by offering differentiated service characteristics while complying with enterprise and industry quality standards.
Sharavska A. V. [9, p. 14]	The degree to which an enterprise achieves its objectives in interaction with the external environment and its ability to align its internal environment with the conditions of a constantly changing external environment within the shortest possible time.
Trydid O. M. [23]	An assessment of the internal potential (state) of an enterprise relative to competitors.
Tsybulska E. I., Matsyhura V. I. [26]	The ability, in the current period and in the long term, to ensure higher production efficiency and more profitable sales of its goods compared to competitors.
Voloshchuk I. P. [6, p. 41]	A generalized economic category that reflects the degree of success and effectiveness of an enterprise's functioning in a competitive market.
Voronkova A. E. [7]	A property of a market entity revealed in the process of competition and enabling it to occupy its niche within the market economy for expanded reproduction, which implies covering all production costs and generating profit from economic activity.

The initial version of the morphological analysis involved the use of a large number of analytical categories, including the source of competitiveness, the logic of competitive advantage creation, the nature of interaction with the external environment, time orientation, the presence of an adaptive component, and systemic orientation. However, excessive detail significantly complicated the interpretation of the results and hindered the identification of the key directions in the evolution of research approaches.

Therefore, this study employs an aggregated morphological matrix that reflects not all possible aspects of enterprise competitiveness, but rather the key directions in the transformation of the scientific understanding of this category. Such an approach preserves the analytical depth of the study while ensuring greater structural clarity and comparability of results.

For the purposes of further analysis, five generalized morphological categories were identified:

- market orientation;
- resource or capability orientation;
- adaptive component;
- long-term orientation;
- systemic orientation.

The selection of these categories is determined by the logic underlying the evolution of the concept of enterprise competitiveness. While earlier interpretations primarily associated competitiveness with market efficiency, product quality, price, profitability, and market share, more recent approaches incorporate:

- the resource- and capability-based foundations of competitive advantages;
- the ability to adapt;
- long-term sustainability;
- the systemic nature of enterprise interaction with the external environment.

Morphological matrix of enterprise competitiveness interpretations is provided in table 3.

The conducted analysis demonstrates that existing definitions of enterprise competitiveness can be conditionally divided into several conceptual groups.

The first group of definitions is based on classical market logic and associates competitiveness primarily with the enterprise's ability to compete successfully in product markets through product quality, price, market share, or profitability. This group includes the definitions proposed by Adamkiewicz-Drwiłło H. G. [30], Buckley

P. J., Pass C. L., Prescott K. [43], Ajitabh A. and Momaya K. [33], Lyshchyshyn O. I. [15], Malykhina T. I. [16], Oxford Reference [51], and Tsybulska E. I. and Matsyhura V. I. [26]. Within these interpretations, competitiveness is viewed primarily as the result of market efficiency and success relative to competitors.

Table 3

Morphological matrix of enterprise competitiveness interpretations

Author	Market orientation	Resource or capability orientation	Adaptive component	Long-term orien-tation	Systemic orien-tation
Adamkiewicz-Drwiłło H. G. [42]	++	–	±	–	–
Ajitabh A., Momaya K. [33]	++	–	–	–	–
Attila C. [34, p. 24]	++	±	±	++	±
Barabas D. O. [1, p. 5]	±	+	++	++	±
Bochko O. Yu., Kozhushko P. I. [5]	+	+	±	+	++
Bondarenko H. S. [4, p. 5]	±	+	±	+	++
Buckley P. J., Pass C. L., Prescott K. [43]	++	+	–	++	±
Chao-Hung W., Li-Chang H. [45]	++	+	±	+	±
Fisunenko P. A. [24]	+	++	±	±	±
Kryvenko H. V. [13, p. 4]	+	±	++	±	±
Kryvenko L. V. [14]	++	–	–	±	–
Kyrchata I. M. [11, p. 6]	+	++	++	++	±
Lyshchyshyn O. I. [15]	++	–	–	–	–
Malykhina T. I. [16, p. 6]	++	–	–	–	–
Oxford Reference: A Dictionary of Economics [51]	++	–	–	–	–
Pikush Yu. P. [12, p. 8]	++	–	–	±	–
Rasulova A. M. [21, p. 7]	+	+	++	++	±
Shershnova Z. Ye., Oborska S. V. [29]	+	++	±	++	±
Shalya O. H. [27, p. 7]	++	–	–	±	–
Sharavska A. V. [9, p. 14]	±	±	++	++	±
Trydid O. M. [23]	+	++	–	±	±
Tsybulska E. I., Matsyhura V. I. [26]	++	+	–	++	–
Voloshchuk I. P. [6, p. 41]	++	±	–	±	–
Voronkova A. E. [7]	++	±	–	+	±

The second group interprets competitiveness through the internal potential of the enterprise, its resources, competencies, and ability to create competitive advantages. This approach is represented in the works of Shershnova Z. Ye. and Oborska S. V. [29], Trydid O. M. [23], Fisunenko P. A. [24], and Bochko O. Yu. and Kozhushko P. I. [5]. Within this framework, competitiveness acquires a pronounced resource- and capability-based character and is considered a derivative of the organization's internal capacities.

The third group of definitions emphasizes enterprise adaptability and its ability to respond to changes in the external environment. This approach is represented in the works of Barabas D. O. [1], Kryvenko H. V. [13], Sharavska A. V. [28], Rasulova A. M. [21], and Kyrchata I. M. [11]. Here, competitiveness is interpreted not as a static state but as a dynamic capability enabling the enterprise to maintain viability and effectiveness under changing competitive conditions.

Particular attention should be paid to definitions in which competitiveness is interpreted as a complex system of interconnected elements and processes. This approach is most comprehensively represented in the work of Bondarenko H. S. [4], where competitiveness is considered a system integrating the enterprise's internal environment, consumers, and competitors into a unified whole. Such interpretations indicate a gradual transition from a linear understanding of competitiveness toward a systemic and multifactorial logic.

The morphological analysis also demonstrates a gradual shift in the time orientation of the concept of enterprise competitiveness. While earlier definitions primarily focused on current market results, profitability, and competitive advantages, more recent interpretations increasingly include:

- long-term maintenance of market positions;
- sustainability of functioning;
- adaptation to environmental changes;
- development of competitive potential;

– the ability to continuously renew competitive advantages.

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that some contemporary definitions already contain elements conceptually close to the future notion of sustainable competitiveness. In particular, this concerns:

– long-term sustainability [11; 21; 34; 43];
– adaptability [1; 11; 13; 28];
– systemic orientation [4; 5];
– the ability to continuously renew competitive advantages [1; 11].

This indicates a gradual transformation in the understanding of enterprise competitiveness from a predominantly market-oriented category toward a more complex characteristic of organizational viability.

Many contemporary definitions of enterprise competitiveness implicitly incorporate adaptability, systemic interaction, and long-term value creation, thereby gradually extending the concept beyond the boundaries of traditional market competition. As a result, competitiveness acquires the features of a broader organizational capability linked to sustainable functioning within a dynamic and multidimensional environment along with market success.

Thus, the conducted morphological analysis demonstrates that contemporary interpretations of enterprise competitiveness are gradually moving beyond exclusively product-market logic. Competitiveness is considered a complex capability enabling enterprises to ensure efficiency, adaptability, the development of competitive potential, and sustainability of functioning within a dynamic external environment.

Consequently, the contemporary understanding of enterprise competitiveness forms the theoretical foundation for the further transition toward the concept of sustainable competitiveness, within which long-term adaptability, systemic sustainability, and the ability to maintain competitive positions within a changing multidimensional interaction space acquire central importance.

2. Bibliometric evolution of competitiveness research

The bibliometric analysis of the concept of competitiveness required a differentiated methodological approach due to the substantial historical expansion and interdisciplinary diversification of the term. Initial searches in Scopus produced an excessively broad dataset, as the term “competitiveness” has been used across numerous unrelated scientific domains, including medicine, biology, engineering, and other technical disciplines. To ensure conceptual coherence, the analysis was restricted to publications in which “competitiveness” appeared in the document title, thereby increasing the likelihood that the concept constituted a central object of investigation rather than a peripheral reference.

The study further limited the dataset to selected subject areas associated with the socioeconomic and managerial understanding of competitiveness. However, preliminary mapping revealed that the disciplinary structure of competitiveness research varied significantly across historical periods. In the earliest period (1962–1985), broader inclusion of subject areas such as Social Sciences and Environmental Science introduced substantial conceptual noise and generated fragmented clusters linked to unrelated domains, including biomedical and technical applications of the term. This fragmentation reflected the absence of a consolidated competitiveness discourse prior to the widespread influence of strategic management and competitiveness theories associated with Michael Porter.

Accordingly, the first two periods (1962–1985 and 1986–2000) were analyzed using a more focused set of subject areas: Business, Management and Accounting; Economics, Econometrics and Finance; Decision Sciences; and Multidisciplinary studies. This restriction improved the interpretability and conceptual consistency of the resulting bibliometric maps. Comparative tests demonstrated that extending the subject-area coverage during the second period produced nearly identical cluster structures, indicating that by the late twentieth century the core competitiveness discourse had become relatively stabilized within these domains.

For the later periods (2001–2015 and 2016–2026), the analytical scope was expanded to include Social Sciences and Environmental Science. This adjustment reflected the growing interdisciplinary transformation of competitiveness research, particularly the increasing integration of sustainability, governance, institutional analysis, resilience, and environmental concerns into the conceptual structure of competitiveness. The post-2015 period was especially influenced by the global sustainability agenda following the Paris Agreement, which accelerated the emergence of themes such as sustainable competitiveness, green innovation, ESG, circular economy, and digital sustainability transitions.

The temporal segmentation of the dataset was theoretically motivated rather than arbitrarily defined. Four historical stages were identified: (1) the foundational pre-Porterian period (1962–1985), characterized by fragmented and weakly integrated uses of the concept; (2) the Porterian and globalization era (1986–2000), during which competitiveness became institutionalized within strategic management and economic policy discourse; (3) the knowledge-based and sustainability transition period (2001–2015), marked by increasing emphasis on innovation, networks, and sustainability; and (4) the sustainable and resilient competitiveness era (2016–2026), associated with ESG-oriented and environmentally embedded interpretations of competitiveness.

Different minimum keyword occurrence thresholds were applied across periods in order to maintain map readability and conceptual interpretability in datasets of varying size. Lower thresholds were necessary for early periods with limited publication volumes, whereas higher thresholds were applied to later periods characterized by substantial growth in scientific output. This adaptive approach enabled the identification of meaningful thematic structures while minimizing visual noise in the bibliometric networks constructed using VOSviewer.

For the first period (1962–1985), to ensure the conceptual consistency and interpretability of the bibliometric analysis, the dataset was restricted to subject areas directly related to the socioeconomic and managerial understanding of

competitiveness. The Scopus search was therefore limited to the following subject categories:

- Business, Management and Accounting;
- Economics, Econometrics and Finance;
- Decision Sciences;
- Multidisciplinary.

The inclusion of these categories was theoretically motivated by the objective of tracing the evolution of competitiveness as an economic, managerial, and organizational concept rather than as a generic interdisciplinary term. Preliminary exploratory searches demonstrated that unrestricted searches generated substantial conceptual noise due to the widespread use of the term “competitiveness” across unrelated scientific domains, including medicine, biology, engineering, sports science, and other technical disciplines.

At the same time, the inclusion of the Multidisciplinary category was considered important in order to preserve publications positioned at the intersection of economics, management, sustainability, governance, and broader societal transformation processes. This became particularly relevant in the later periods of analysis, when competitiveness evolved into an interdisciplinary and sustainability-oriented research domain.

The selected subject-area configuration allowed the analysis to retain conceptual focus while simultaneously capturing the gradual expansion of competitiveness discourse from predominantly economic and managerial interpretations toward broader organizational, institutional, social, and sustainability-related perspectives.

The results of the bibliometric analysis for the first period (1962–1985) indicate that at this stage the concept of competitiveness had not yet emerged as a coherent and integrated scientific category. The keyword map demonstrates low network

density, a limited number of stable interconnections between terms, and the absence of a clearly identifiable conceptual core (fig. 1).

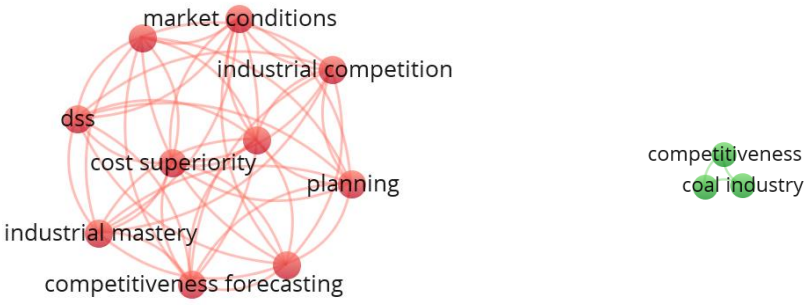

Fig. 1. Network visualization of the competitiveness discourse (1962–1985) created with VOSviewer

Unlike later periods, competitiveness during this stage was used primarily within fragmented techno-economic, industrial-economic, and managerial-planning contexts within the broader socioeconomic research domain. The most prominent cluster combines terms associated with forecasting, planning, and managerial optimization, including competitiveness forecasting, political-economic forecasting, technology forecasting, input price forecasting, planning, DSS, industrial competition, industrial mastery, and market conditions.

The dominance of such terminology indicates that, even within the selected socioeconomic and managerial subject areas, competitiveness was initially interpreted primarily as an object of economic forecasting, industrial-economic planning, and managerial optimization rather than as an independent strategic category. During this period, the concept of competitiveness had not yet become closely associated with

theories of strategic management, organizational capabilities, innovation-driven development, or sustainable competitive advantage.

Particular attention should be paid to the presence of terms such as DSS (decision support systems), planning, and forecasting, which reveal the close relationship between the early competitiveness discourse and the logic of managerial cybernetics, systems planning, decision sciences, and economic-mathematical modeling. This allows the early stage of competitiveness research to be interpreted as predominantly technocratic and instrumentally oriented.

The second, significantly less developed cluster includes the terms competitiveness, coal industry, cost superiority, and cost-minimizing model. Within this cluster, competitiveness is effectively reduced to issues of production efficiency, cost minimization, and price advantage in industrial production. Such an interpretation reflects the dominance of classical industrial-economic logic, in which competitiveness was primarily associated with cost efficiency and operational superiority.

Of particular importance is the absence during this period of terms associated with innovation, knowledge, organizational capabilities, sustainability, stakeholders, ESG, institutional environments, or environmental dimensions of competitiveness. This suggests that competitiveness in 1962–1985 had not yet been perceived, even within the socioeconomic and managerial research domains, as a complex interdisciplinary category integrating economic, organizational, social, and environmental dimensions.

Thus, the first stage in the development of competitiveness research can be characterized as a pre-Porterian phase of fragmented techno-economic competitiveness discourse formation. During this period, competitiveness did not yet function as an independent theory of strategic advantage, but remained primarily embedded within the contexts of industrial planning, forecasting, and production-

economic efficiency. Only in subsequent decades did competitiveness gradually begin to transform into a more integrated strategic and organizational category.

For the second period (1986–2000), the bibliometric dataset was expanded to include six subject areas:

- Business, Management and Accounting;
- Economics, Econometrics and Finance;
- Social Sciences;
- Environmental Science;
- Decision Sciences;
- Multidisciplinary.

The inclusion of Social Sciences and Environmental Science reflected the gradual broadening of competitiveness research beyond narrowly economic and managerial interpretations. At the same time, comparative testing demonstrated that, unlike the first historical stage, the inclusion of broader disciplinary domains no longer generated excessive conceptual fragmentation or unrelated thematic clusters. Instead, the resulting bibliometric structure remained relatively coherent and strategically integrated, indicating that by the late twentieth century competitiveness had already evolved into a substantially more consolidated interdisciplinary research domain.

The bibliometric map for this period (fig. 2) demonstrates a fundamental transformation in the structure of competitiveness research. Unlike the fragmented and weakly integrated discourse of the previous stage, the network visualization for 1986–2000 reveals substantially higher conceptual consolidation, stronger network density, and the emergence of several interconnected thematic clusters.

This transformation largely coincides with the growing influence of strategic management theory, globalization processes, and the institutionalization of competitiveness as a central category in both managerial and economic policy discourse. In contrast to the earlier techno-economic and forecasting-oriented

interpretations, competitiveness during this period progressively linked with strategic positioning, innovation, productivity, international trade, and national economic performance.

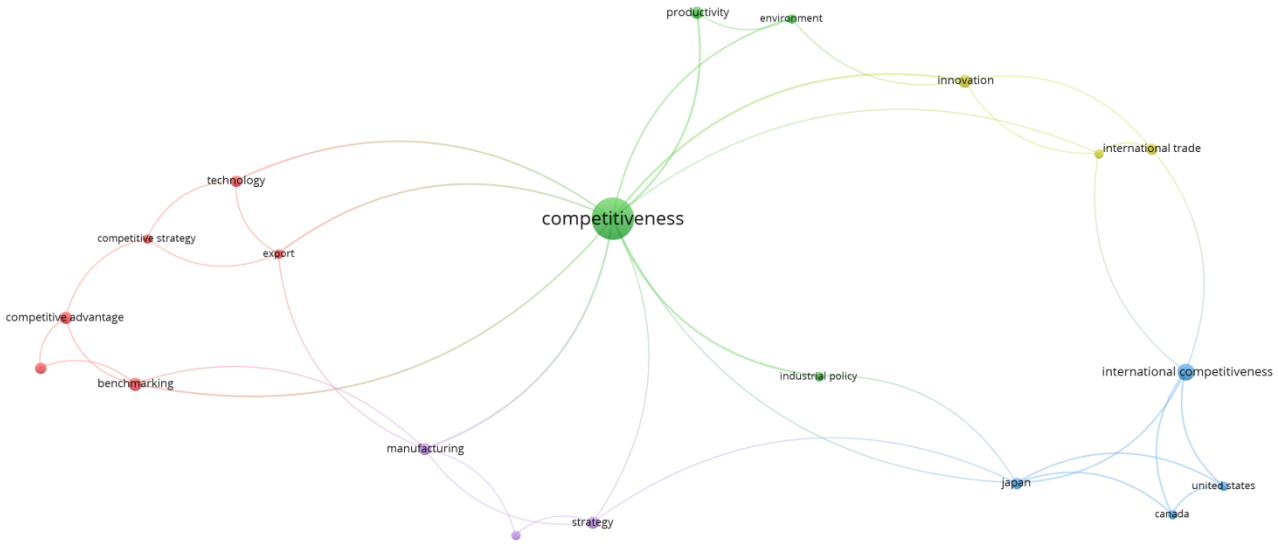

Fig. 2. Network visualization of the competitiveness discourse (1986–2000) created with VOSviewer

The central position of the term competitiveness, characterized by the highest occurrence frequency and the strongest total link strength within the network, indicates the emergence of a more integrated conceptual core around which the discourse began to consolidate. The map demonstrates that competitiveness became interconnected with productivity, innovation, manufacturing, industrial policy, strategy, export, and international competitiveness, reflecting the transition from fragmented operational interpretations toward broader strategic and macroeconomic perspectives.

One of the most prominent clusters combines terms such as benchmarking, competitive advantage, competitive strategy, performance measurement, export, and technology. This cluster clearly reflects the growing influence of Porterian strategic management logic on competitiveness research. In particular, the emergence of concepts such as competitive advantage and competitive strategy indicates that competitiveness began to be interpreted through the lens of sustainable strategic positioning, differentiation, and firm-level strategic capabilities rather than solely through production efficiency or cost minimization.

The presence of benchmarking and performance measurement additionally demonstrates the growing managerial orientation of competitiveness research. Competitiveness during this period became closely linked to organizational assessment, comparative performance analysis, and the search for managerial practices capable of ensuring superior market positioning.

A second important cluster is associated with international competitiveness, foreign direct investment, international trade, Canada, Japan, and the United States. This cluster reflects the globalization-driven expansion of competitiveness discourse beyond the firm level toward national and international economic systems. Competitiveness became interpreted as a determinant of national economic performance, export capacity, technological modernization, and integration into global markets.

Particularly significant is the strong presence of Japan and international competitiveness within the network. This reflects the broader geopolitical and economic context of the late twentieth century, during which Japanese industrial and technological success substantially influenced global debates regarding industrial policy, technological upgrading, and national competitive performance.

Another important transformation concerns the emergence of innovation, productivity, and environment as interconnected elements of the competitiveness discourse. Although environmental considerations remained relatively peripheral

during this period, their appearance within the network indicates the early stages of conceptual expansion beyond purely economic and strategic dimensions. Competitiveness began to incorporate issues related to technological development, innovation systems, and broader environmental conditions influencing economic performance.

Nevertheless, sustainability-related concepts, stakeholder perspectives, ESG logic, resilience, and long-term societal viability remained largely absent from the conceptual core of the discourse. Environmental dimensions appeared primarily as supplementary contextual factors rather than as foundational determinants of competitiveness itself. Thus, while the 1986–2000 period marks the institutionalization of strategic and international competitiveness, it still largely preserves the dominance of productivity-oriented and market-centered interpretations.

Overall, the second stage of competitiveness research can be characterized as the Porterian and globalization era, during which competitiveness became transformed from a fragmented techno-economic concept into a relatively coherent strategic, managerial, and macroeconomic paradigm. This period established the theoretical and institutional foundations upon which later knowledge-based, innovation-oriented, and sustainability-centered interpretations of competitiveness would subsequently emerge.

The third period (2001–2015) reflects a further qualitative transformation of competitiveness research associated with the emergence of knowledge-based economic models, innovation-centered development paradigms, regional and network approaches, and the initial integration of sustainability-related concepts into the conceptual structure of competitiveness discourse. In contrast to the previous stage, the bibliometric network for this period demonstrates increasing conceptual density, substantial thematic diversification and growing interdisciplinarity (fig. 3).

The analysis for this period was conducted using the saame six subject areas. Unlike the earlier periods, the inclusion of Social Sciences and Environmental

Science no longer produced conceptual fragmentation. Instead, sustainability-related, regional, and institutional dimensions became integrated into the broader competitiveness discourse, indicating the gradual transformation of competitiveness into a multidimensional and interdisciplinary research domain.

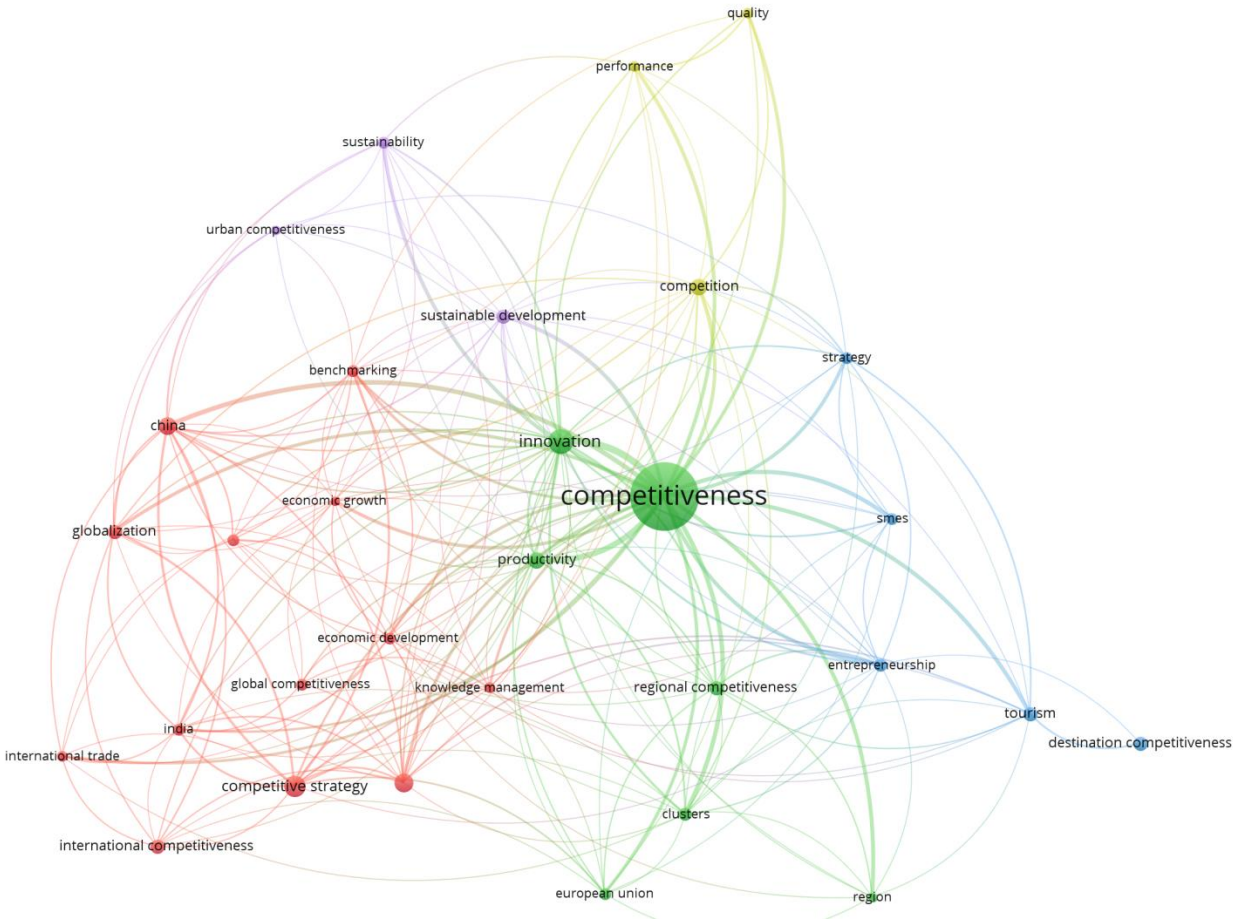

Fig. 3. Network visualization of the competitiveness discourse (2001–2015) created with VOSviewer

The central position of the term competitiveness, characterized by extremely high occurrence frequency and the strongest total link strength in the network, reflects the substantial consolidation of competitiveness research during this period. Competitiveness became strongly interconnected with innovation, productivity,

entrepreneurship, regional competitiveness, sustainability, sustainable development, globalization, strategy, and knowledge management, demonstrating the emergence of a significantly more complex conceptual structure compared to previous historical stages.

One of the dominant clusters combines competitive strategy, competitive advantage, benchmarking, economic development, economic growth, globalization, national competitiveness, international competitiveness, international trade, and knowledge management. This cluster reflects the continuing influence of Porterian strategic management logic while simultaneously demonstrating the transition toward knowledge-based and globalization-oriented interpretations of competitiveness.

The growing importance of knowledge management and innovation indicates that competitiveness starts to be understood in context of organizational learning, knowledge creation, technological capabilities, and innovation systems. Competitiveness gradually evolved into a dynamic capability associated with continuous adaptation and the generation of intellectual and technological advantages.

Another important cluster centers around innovation, productivity, clusters, regional competitiveness, European Union, and region. This reflects the growing influence of regional development theories, cluster-based competitiveness models, and innovation ecosystems. Competitiveness during this period progressively linked to spatial, institutional, and network perspectives rather than exclusively through firm-level or national productivity indicators.

Particularly significant is the emergence of entrepreneurship and SMEs as relatively central concepts within the network. This indicates the growing recognition of entrepreneurial activity, small business development, and innovation-driven firms as important determinants of competitive performance in the knowledge economy.

The network also demonstrates the growing internationalization of competitiveness discourse. The strong presence of China, India, globalization, international trade, and international competitiveness reflects the broader

transformation of the global economic system associated with emerging markets, global production networks, and intensified international economic integration. In contrast to the previous period, competitiveness gradually evolves towwards rapidly developing emerging economic systems, along with developed industrial economies as it was traditionally.

One of the most important conceptual shifts of this period concerns the emergence of sustainability and sustainable development as visible elements within the competitiveness network. Although sustainability-related concepts still remained relatively peripheral compared to innovation and productivity, their integration into the network indicates the beginning of a major ontological transformation of competitiveness discourse.

Sustainability during this stage was not yet fully integrated into the conceptual core of competitiveness. Rather, it appeared primarily as an adjacent and complementary dimension associated with regional development, urban competitiveness, environmental conditions, and broader societal transformation processes. Nevertheless, the appearance of sustainability and sustainable development within the bibliometric structure demonstrates that competitiveness research had already begun moving beyond purely market-centered and productivity-oriented interpretations.

The emergence of destination competitiveness and tourism additionally illustrates the sectoral diversification of competitiveness research. Competitiveness became applied to cities, regions, tourism destinations, and territorial systems, further contributing to the expansion of its conceptual boundaries.

Overall, the 2001–2015 period can be characterized as the stage of knowledge-based and sustainability-oriented transformation of competitiveness research. During this period, competitiveness evolved from a predominantly strategic and macroeconomic paradigm into a substantially more multidimensional concept integrating innovation, knowledge management, regional development,

entrepreneurship, globalization, and the early sustainability discourse. These transformations created the conceptual preconditions for the subsequent emergence of sustainable, resilient, and stakeholder-oriented interpretations of competitiveness after 2015.

The fourth period (2016–2026) reflects the most substantial conceptual transformation in the historical evolution of competitiveness research. Unlike the previous stages, where competitiveness remained predominantly associated with productivity, strategic positioning, innovation, or globalization, the contemporary bibliometric structure demonstrates the emergence of a deeply interconnected sustainability-oriented and systemically embedded competitiveness paradigm.

The analysis for this period was conducted using the same set of six subject areas. For the 2016–2026 period, an additional thesaurus-based refinement procedure was applied in VOSviewer in order to improve the conceptual interpretability of the bibliometric network. The thesaurus served two primary functions. First, synonymous and closely related terms were unified in order to reduce terminological fragmentation within the dataset. For example, plural and singular forms, as well as alternative expressions referring to the same conceptual category, were merged into unified terms (e.g., “innovations” and “innovation”, “small and medium enterprises” and “SMEs”).

Second, methodological and geographically descriptive terms that did not contribute directly to the conceptual interpretation of competitiveness evolution were excluded from the visualization. These included statistical and methodological expressions (e.g., “structural equation modeling”, “panel data”, “factor analysis”) as well as geographical entities in the extended thesaurus version.

The application of the thesaurus-based refinement procedure made it possible to reduce visual noise and improve the visibility of the core thematic structures associated with sustainability, resilience, innovation, ESG, governance, and stakeholder-oriented competitiveness. As a result, the final bibliometric map more

accurately reflected the conceptual transformation of competitiveness research during the contemporary sustainability-oriented stage of its development.

The bibliometric map (fig. 4) demonstrates a highly dense and strongly interconnected conceptual structure centered around the term competitiveness, which possesses the highest occurrence frequency and total link strength in the network. Unlike previous historical periods, however, competitiveness is no longer dominated by exclusively economic or strategic categories. Instead, the contemporary discourse integrates sustainability, digitalization, resilience, innovation, social responsibility, and dynamic organizational capabilities into a unified conceptual framework.

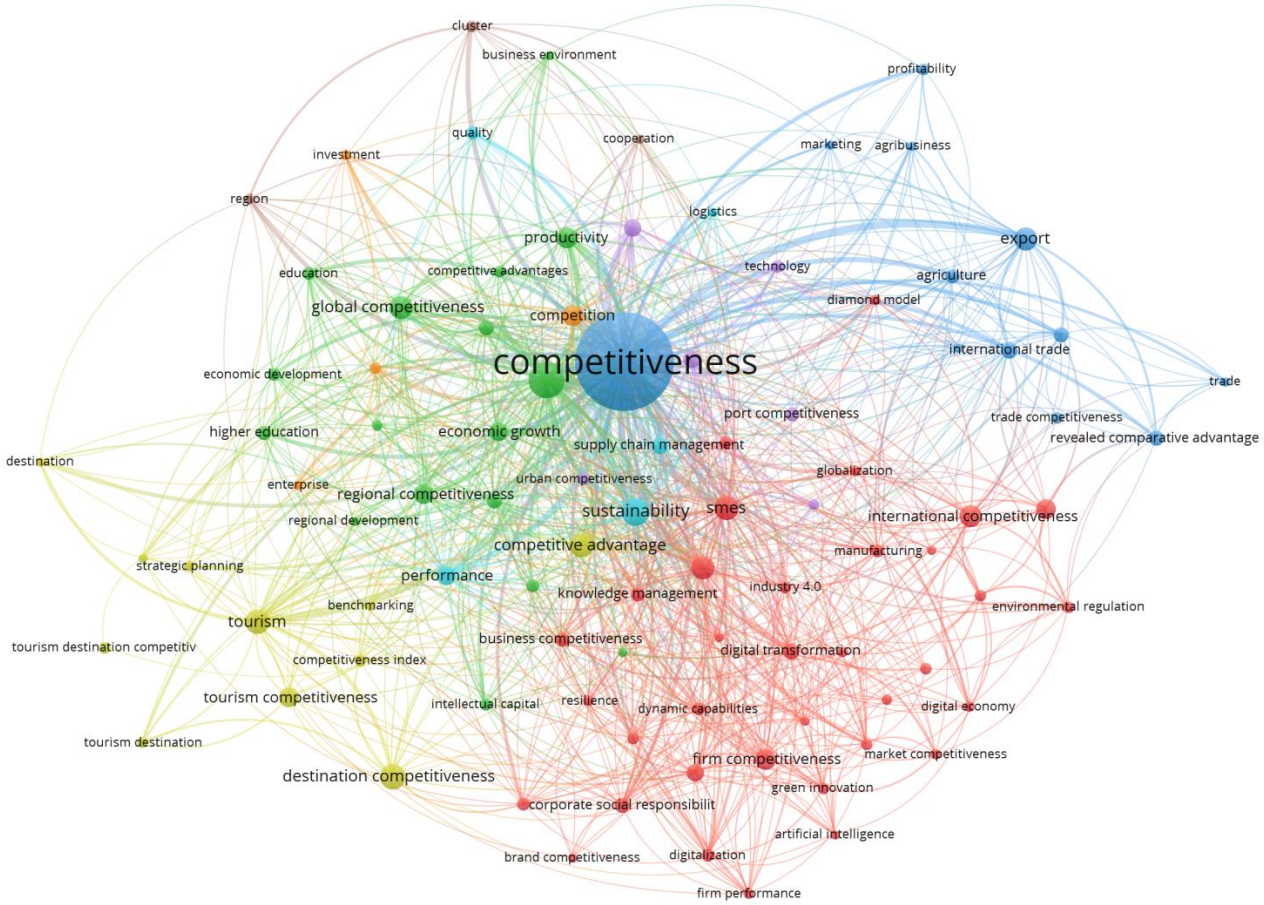

Fig. 4. Network visualization of the competitiveness discourse (2016–2026) created with VOSviewer

One of the most important transformations concerns the growing centrality of sustainability and sustainable development within the competitiveness discourse. Sustainability demonstrates extremely high occurrence frequency and strong network connectivity with competitiveness, innovation, SMEs, strategic management, supply chain management, productivity, resilience, and tourism competitiveness. Thus, sustainability has evolved from a peripheral contextual factor into one of the foundational dimensions of competitiveness itself.

The network structure suggests that sustainability is no longer interpreted solely through environmental protection. Instead, it becomes integrated with organizational adaptability, innovation systems, corporate governance, social responsibility, digital transformation, and long-term value creation. The emergence of concepts such as circular economy, green innovation, renewable energy, environmental regulation, and climate change demonstrates the progressive ecological embedding of competitiveness research.

Another major transformation concerns the rapid expansion of digital and technological competitiveness dimensions. The overlay visualization clearly demonstrates that concepts such as artificial intelligence, digital transformation, digitalization, digital economy, Industry 4.0, and green innovation belong to the most recent layers of the discourse, characterized by the latest average publication years within the network.

Particularly important is the appearance of artificial intelligence and digital transformation as closely interconnected elements within the sustainability-oriented competitiveness cluster. It means contemporary competitiveness is based on traditional strategic or productivity-related advantages along with digital adaptability, technological integration, data-driven organizational capabilities, and innovation ecosystems.

The network additionally reveals the growing importance of resilience and dynamic capabilities. These concepts reflect a substantial shift from static

interpretations of competitiveness toward adaptive and evolutionary perspectives. Competitiveness is more associated with the capacity of firms, regions, and economic systems to absorb shocks, adapt to turbulent environments, and maintain long-term viability under conditions of uncertainty.

The appearance of COVID-19 within the conceptual network further reinforces this transformation. The pandemic contributed to the growing integration of resilience, sustainability, supply chain management, and digital transformation within competitiveness discourse, accelerating the transition toward systemic and risk-oriented interpretations of competitive performance.

Another important characteristic of the contemporary stage is the substantial diversification of the objects of competitiveness research. Alongside traditional firm- and national-level competitiveness concepts, the network includes destination competitiveness, tourism competitiveness, urban competitiveness, port competitiveness, business competitiveness, corporate competitiveness, and organizational competitiveness. So competitiveness functions as a multidimensional systems category applicable to territories, industries, networks, ecosystems, and institutional structures.

The tourism-related cluster deserves particular attention. Destination competitiveness and tourism competitiveness possess strong internal connectivity and substantial integration with sustainability-related concepts. This indicates the growing role of sustainability-oriented territorial development, smart destinations, and resilience-based tourism models within contemporary competitiveness discourse.

At the same time, traditional concepts associated with export competitiveness, comparative advantage, international trade, productivity, and profitability remain present within the network. However, these concepts no longer dominate the discourse to the same extent as in earlier historical periods. Instead, they become increasingly integrated into broader sustainability- and innovation-oriented conceptual structures.

The overlay visualization (fig. 5) provides especially important evidence regarding the temporal evolution of competitiveness research. Earlier layers of the discourse remain concentrated around productivity, globalization, strategic management, benchmarking, and classical international competitiveness concepts. In contrast, the most recent conceptual layers are associated with artificial intelligence, digital transformation, green innovation, market competitiveness, digital economy, circular economy, and resilience-oriented sustainability approaches. This temporal differentiation clearly demonstrates the ongoing ontological transformation of competitiveness research toward digitally enabled, sustainability-centered, and adaptive interpretations of long-term competitive performance.

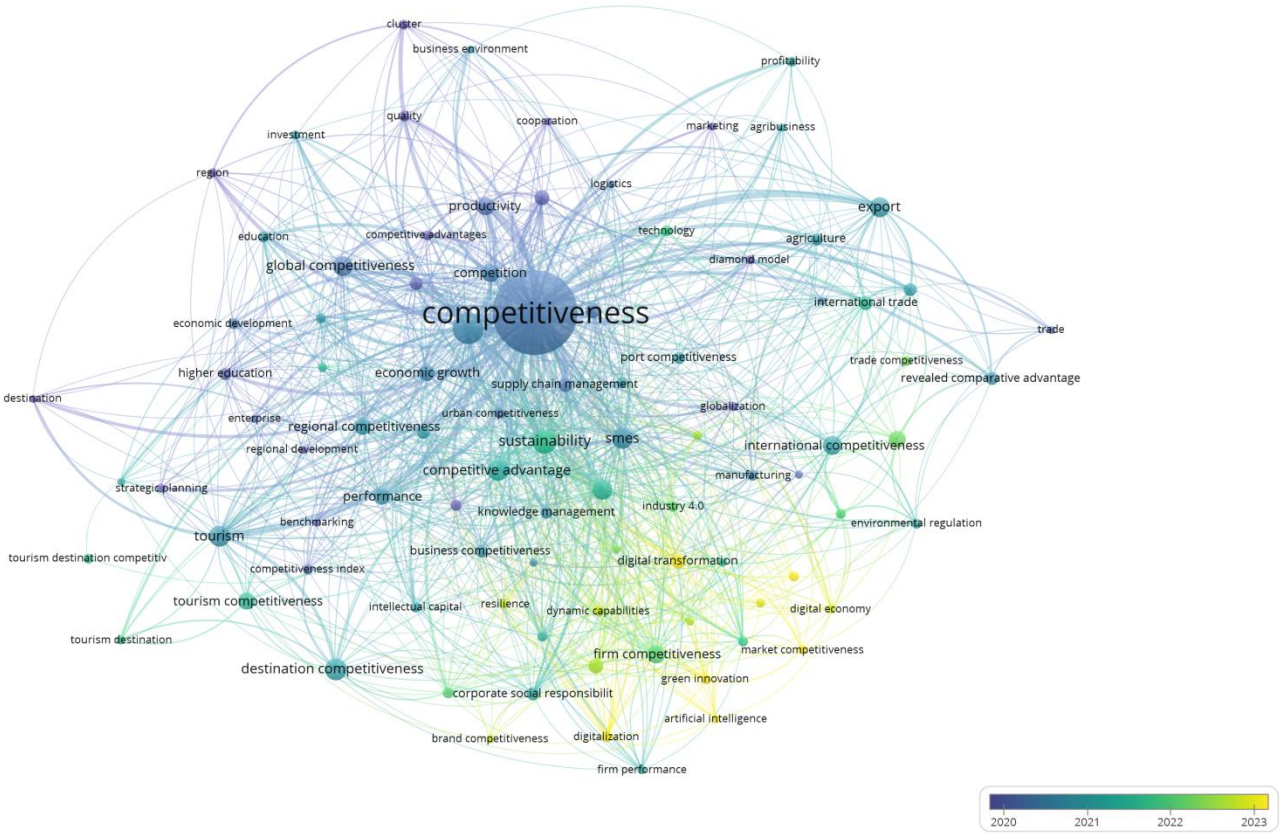

Fig. 5. Overlay visualization of the competitiveness discourse (2016–2026) created with VOSviewer

Overall, the 2016–2026 period can be characterized as the stage of sustainable, digital, and resilient competitiveness. During this period, competitiveness evolved into a highly interdisciplinary systems concept integrating economic efficiency, sustainability, technological transformation, organizational adaptability, resilience, stakeholder orientation, and long-term societal viability. The contemporary discourse interprets competitiveness not merely as the ability to outperform rivals, but as the capacity of economic and organizational systems to sustain development, generate long-term value, adapt to uncertainty, and maintain resilience within rapidly transforming environmental, technological, and social conditions.

Taken together, the four historical stages demonstrate a gradual expansion of the conceptual boundaries of competitiveness. Competitiveness evolved from a relatively narrow category associated with industrial-economic efficiency toward a multidimensional interdisciplinary construct integrating economic, organizational, technological, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions.

Sustainability-related concepts progressively migrated from the periphery of the discourse toward its conceptual core. While sustainability was almost entirely absent from early competitiveness research, contemporary bibliometric structures demonstrate strong integration between competitiveness, resilience, digital transformation, environmental regulation, green innovation, corporate social responsibility, and long-term adaptive capabilities. This transformation indicates that competitiveness is explained not merely as the ability to outperform competitors in current market conditions, but also the capacity of economic and organizational systems to sustain long-term development, generate multidimensional value, and maintain viability under conditions of environmental, technological, and societal turbulence.

Thus, the bibliometric analysis provides empirical confirmation of the broader theoretical transformation examined above. The evolution of competitiveness research demonstrates a gradual transition from classical market-centered and productivity-

oriented interpretations toward more systemic, adaptive, stakeholder-oriented, and sustainability-centered conceptualizations. Consequently, the contemporary discourse creates the theoretical foundations for the emergence of sustainable competitiveness as a distinct and qualitatively new stage in the evolution of competitiveness theory.

3. Conceptual approaches to sustainable competitiveness

Despite the growing popularity of the concept of sustainable competitiveness in academic and institutional discourse, its interpretation remains conceptually heterogeneous. Existing literature employs this term to describe various, often only partially overlapping phenomena, including long-term economic productivity, sustainable economic growth, environmentally oriented competitiveness, inclusive development, ESG-oriented governance, and the ability to maintain prosperity for future generations. This indicates that sustainable competitiveness has not yet evolved into a unified theoretical category with clearly defined ontological boundaries.

The emergence of the concept of sustainable competitiveness is largely associated with the recognition of the limitations inherent in traditional approaches to competitiveness, which were primarily based on indicators of productivity, economic growth, and market efficiency [36; 52; 72]. As economic thought evolved, classical competitiveness models proved insufficient in accounting for the long-term consequences of economic growth, including resource depletion, environmental degradation, and increasing social inequality.

Sustainable competitiveness as a concept and a scientific discussion field was also strongly influenced by the broader paradigm of sustainable development formulated in the Brundtland Report and further institutionalized through international sustainability agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [77; 81]. Within this paradigm, long-term economic development can no longer be considered separately from environmental protection, social inclusion, and intergenerational responsibility. As a result, competitiveness began to be interpreted

not only through productivity and market success, but additionally – through the ability to sustain economic, social, environmental, and institutional viability over time.

The emergence of sustainable competitiveness can also be interpreted as a response to the limitations of traditional competitiveness frameworks rooted in productivity and competitive advantage. Porter's framework of competitive advantage substantially expanded traditional interpretations of competitiveness by linking firm performance to internal efficiency along with industry structure, value chains, and the broader competitive environment [66]. Later, Porter [68] further developed this perspective by emphasizing the systemic and institutional determinants of competitiveness at the national level. Nevertheless, despite broadening the analytical boundaries of competitiveness, these approaches remained primarily focused on economic performance and competitive productivity, without explicitly integrating long-term social and environmental sustainability dimensions.

Among the most influential institutional approaches to sustainable competitiveness are the frameworks developed by the World Economic Forum and SolAbility [52; 72]. Both organizations proceed from the assumption that traditional economic competitiveness cannot be regarded as a sufficient condition for long-term societal well-being. However, their approaches differ substantially in both methodology and conceptual logic.

The World Economic Forum defines sustainable competitiveness as "the set of institutions, policies and factors that make a nation productive over the longer term while ensuring social and environmental sustainability" [42]. This definition preserves the classical emphasis on productivity as the foundation of competitiveness while introducing two fundamentally new dimensions:

– long-term temporal orientation;
– the requirement to ensure social and environmental sustainability.

Thus, within the WEF approach, sustainability effectively functions as an additional dimension of traditional competitiveness that adjusts classical indicators of productivity and economic efficiency.

A similar logic is reflected in the work of Corrigan G., Crotti R., Drzeniek M., and Serin C. [42], who also interpret sustainable competitiveness through the ability of an economic system to maintain long-term productivity while ensuring social and environmental sustainability.

A different perspective is represented by SolAbility, which defines sustainable competitiveness as "the ability to generate and sustain inclusive wealth for all, without diminishing the future capability of sustaining or increasing current wealth levels" [44]. In this case, sustainability no longer acts as an external corrective factor applied to competitiveness, but rather becomes its intrinsic characteristic. The focus shifts from current productivity toward the intertemporal preservation of the capacity to create prosperity without exhausting the natural, social, and institutional foundations of future development.

A similar logic can also be observed in the definition proposed by Aiginger K., Bärenthaler-Sieber S., and Vogel J. [39], who associate sustainable competitiveness with the ability to maintain well-being and a decent standard of living without reducing society's future capacity to sustain or increase current levels of prosperity. In this interpretation, competitiveness becomes closely integrated with the logic of intergenerational responsibility and long-term societal sustainability.

At the same time, some definitions remain considerably narrower and interpret sustainable competitiveness primarily as the ability to maintain competitive positions over the long term. For example, Cheba K., Bąk I., and Szopik-Depczyńska K. [38] define sustainable competitiveness as "the ability to compete sustainably and the achievement of a sustainable competitive position." Such interpretations essentially preserve the traditional market-oriented logic of competitiveness while merely supplementing it with a temporal dimension of stability.

At the same time, contemporary interpretations of sustainable competitiveness converge with stakeholder-oriented perspectives. Stakeholder theory, originally developed by R. Edward Freeman [56], argues that organizations create value through relationships with a broad range of stakeholders rather than solely through the pursuit of shareholder interests. From this perspective, competitiveness is considered depending on the ability of organizations to balance and sustain value creation across multiple stakeholder groups, including employees, customers, communities, suppliers, regulators, and future generations.

Thus, the conducted analysis demonstrates that contemporary interpretations of sustainable competitiveness can be conditionally divided into several conceptual directions:

- sustainability-adjusted competitiveness;
- long-term competitiveness;
- socio-environmental competitiveness;
- inclusive prosperity competitiveness;
- intergenerational sustainability competitiveness.

At the same time, most existing approaches do not perform a complete reconceptualization of the nature of competitiveness itself, but rather expand classical market-oriented models by incorporating environmental, social, or temporal parameters. In other words, sustainability often functions not as a new ontological foundation of competitiveness, but rather as an additional corrective component applied to traditional approaches.

Existing approaches to sustainable competitiveness can therefore largely be interpreted as attempts to reconcile two influential intellectual traditions: the productivity-based view of competitiveness associated with Porter and the stakeholder-oriented view of value creation associated with Freeman. However, a coherent theoretical framework integrating these perspectives remains largely underdeveloped.

As a result, sustainable competitiveness remains a conceptually fragmented category that combines different research logics, levels of analysis, and normative assumptions. This creates the preconditions for the further theoretical reconceptualization of sustainable competitiveness as a systemic capability of organizations to maintain competitive positions within a multidimensional stakeholder interaction space while ensuring long-term adaptability, legitimacy, and intergenerational sustainability.

Importantly, sustainable competitiveness should not be reduced either to organizational sustainability or to ESG compliance. While sustainability-oriented approaches primarily focus on the reduction of environmental and social externalities, sustainable competitiveness concerns the systemic ability of adaptive organizations to maintain viable and legitimate positions within multidimensional stakeholder environments over extended temporal horizons.

4. Ontological boundaries of sustainable competitiveness

The previously conducted morphological and bibliometric analyses demonstrated that the contemporary understanding of competitiveness extends beyond exclusively market-centered and productivity-oriented interpretations. Modern approaches to competitiveness place growing emphasis on adaptability, systemness, long-term sustainability, stakeholder interactions, institutional environments, and the ability to maintain legitimacy under conditions of changing societal expectations. At the same time, an important question remains insufficiently addressed in the existing literature: which types of objects are, in principle, capable of possessing sustainable competitiveness as a systemic property? This necessitates clarification of the ontological boundaries of the category of sustainable competitiveness.

Contemporary scientific literature applies the concept of competitiveness to an extremely broad range of objects. These include [2; 8; 10; 12; 19; 22; 42; 44; 47; 62; 66]:

– products and services;
– technologies;
– information;
– personnel;
– capital;
– management systems;
– enterprise potential;
– firms and organizations;
– associations of enterprises;
– industries and clusters;
– territories (cities and regions);
– national economies;
– interstate formations and supranational entities.

Such ontological heterogeneity of competitive objects indicates that the category of competitiveness is used in modern research substantially more broadly than merely for describing market rivalry among firms. At the same time, however, not all of these objects possess equal capacities for reproducing competitive advantages, adapting institutionally, or maintaining long-term sustainability.

In this regard, the various objects of competitiveness may be differentiated according to their level of ontological complexity, adaptive capacity, stakeholder heterogeneity, and governance structures (table 4).

As the ontological complexity of competitive objects increases, the applicability of sustainable competitiveness also expands. While elemental objects may possess temporary or context-specific competitive advantages, only adaptive

systems characterized by governance capacity, stakeholder multiplicity, and long-term continuity are capable of sustaining competitiveness as a systemic property over time.

Elemental ontological level of objects of competitiveness

The first category includes:

– products;

– technologies;

– services;

– individual innovations.

Table 4

Ontological levels of competitive objects and the applicability of sustainable competitiveness

Ontological level	Objects of competitiveness	Adaptive capacity	Stakeholder heterogeneity	Governance structures	Applicability of sustainable competitive-ness
Elemental	Product, service, technology, information, documentation, individual innovation	Low	Low	Absent	Limited or indirect
Functional-resource	Personnel, capital, management system, enterprise potential	Partial	Limited	Partial	Conditional
Organizational	Enterprise, firm, university, organization	High	High	Present	High
Supra-organizational	Association of enterprises, cluster, industry, city, region	High	High	Present	High
Systemic	National economy, interstate association	Very high	Very high	Complex multi-level governance	High

Such objects are indeed capable of possessing competitive advantages, superiority in price, quality, functional characteristics, or technological efficiency. It is precisely in this sense that competitiveness is traditionally interpreted within

classical market-oriented approaches, primarily associated with theories of competitive advantage and industry competition [37; 66].

However, elemental competitive objects do not possess:

– their own governance structures;
– stakeholder multiplicity;
– mechanisms of long-term adaptation;
– the capacity to maintain institutional legitimacy;
– autonomous capabilities for strategic transformation.

In other words, an individual product or technology may be competitive, but it is incapable of independently sustaining the long-term stability of its competitiveness over time. Its competitive advantages exist only as derivatives of broader organizational, institutional, and managerial systems.

In contrast, organizations, regions, clusters, and national economies represent multilayered adaptive systems characterized by:

– mechanisms of resource coordination;
– internal governance structures;
– multiplicity of stakeholder relationships;
– capacities for institutional adaptation;
– mechanisms for reproducing and transforming competitive advantages.

This interpretation largely corresponds with systemic and resource-based approaches developed within the resource-based view of the firm [37], dynamic capabilities theory [75], and stakeholder-oriented approaches [56].

Thus, sustainable competitiveness should be interpreted not as a simple extension of the classical concept of competitiveness, but as a particular form of systemic viability emerging under conditions of long-term reproduction of competitive positions, institutional adaptation, and the maintenance of legitimacy within a changing external environment.

Several systemic conditions determine whether competitiveness can evolve into sustainable competitiveness within adaptive organizational systems. The first such condition is adaptive governance. Sustainable competitiveness presupposes the existence of mechanisms for strategic coordination, resource reallocation, and adaptation to changing environmental conditions. Governance structures enable systems to respond to external changes, to maintain long-term integrity and reproducibility of competitive advantages.

The second condition is stakeholder heterogeneity. Unlike elemental objects, adaptive systems operate within environments involving interactions among multiple stakeholders possessing different interests, expectations, and sources of influence. The competitiveness of such systems depends on their ability to coordinate and balance these relationships [57; 56].

The third condition is temporal continuity. Sustainable competitiveness presupposes the ability of a system to maintain competitive positions both within the current time horizon and over the long term. This requires mechanisms for capability accumulation, organizational learning, innovation renewal, and intertemporal adaptation [75].

The fourth condition is legitimacy management. Under contemporary institutional conditions, competitiveness increasingly depends on the ability of organizations and economic systems to maintain social, normative, and institutional legitimacy. This concerns market efficiency, but also compliance with changing societal expectations, sustainability frameworks, and stakeholder demands.

Finally, one of the most important conditions of sustainable competitiveness is multi-domain interaction. Contemporary adaptive systems simultaneously operate within multiple spaces of competition: market, labor and talent, institutional, innovation, reputational, and societal domains. Accordingly, the sustainability of competitiveness is determined not by isolated advantages within a single domain, but

by the ability to maintain adaptive positions across several interconnected spheres of interaction.

Therefore, competitive advantage may exist at all ontological levels, whereas sustainable competitiveness requires systemic adaptive capacity. For this reason, sustainable competitiveness should be regarded not as a property of isolated objects, but as a characteristic of adaptive systems capable of ensuring the long-term coordination of resources, stakeholder relationships, institutional legitimacy, and intertemporal sustainability.

5. Toward a Stakeholder-Based and Multi-Domain Interpretation of Sustainable Competitiveness

Classical theories of competitiveness are predominantly based on market-centric assumptions, within which an organization is viewed primarily as an actor engaged in market rivalry and seeking to achieve superiority over competitors through increased efficiency, cost reduction, the formation of competitive advantages, and the strengthening of market positions. This logic is most consistently represented in Michael Porter's works on competitive advantage, industry structure, and strategic positioning [67; 66]. A significant influence on the development of these approaches was also exerted by the resource-based view, which interprets competitiveness through the possession of unique resources and capabilities [37].

Despite the significant contribution of classical market-oriented theories to competitiveness research, their analytical limitations are becoming more evident under conditions of growing organizational ecosystem complexity, institutional interdependence, and the expansion of the range of actors influencing the sustainability of organizations' competitive positions.

In contemporary conditions, an organization is forced to interact in complicated environment including product and service markets, and multiple stakeholder groups possessing their own interests, expectations, and mechanisms of influence. As a

result, competitiveness is less determined exclusively by market efficiency and more dependent on the organization's ability to maintain sustainable relationships with various groups of stakeholders.

This transformation largely corresponds with the logic of Stakeholder Theory, primarily associated with the works of R. Edward Freeman [56]. Within this approach, an organization is viewed not as a mechanism for maximizing shareholder profit, but as a system of interactions among multiple stakeholders, including employees, investors, customers, suppliers, local communities, public institutions, and other groups capable of influencing the organization's activity or being affected by its decisions.

From this perspective, different stakeholder groups become linked to distinct domains of competition. Customers generate product and service competition; employees shape talent competition and human-capital-based advantages [37; 40]; investors influence access to financial resources and long-term investment stability [56]; regulators affect institutional legitimacy and regulatory adaptability [54; 74]; while academia and innovation networks contribute to knowledge-based competitiveness and technological development [64; 69].

Organizations do not merely interact with these stakeholder groups passively. Rather, they actively compete for access to stakeholder-related resources, legitimacy, trust, knowledge, loyalty, and long-term support. In contemporary organizational ecosystems, competition unfolds both through market transactions and through the organization's ability to attract, retain, and coordinate strategically important stakeholders [56; 65].

For example, organizations compete for highly qualified human capital in labor and talent markets [40]; for reputational legitimacy in societal and institutional environments [74]; for investment trust in financial ecosystems [56]; and for access to innovation networks capable of generating technological and knowledge-based

advantages [69; 75]. Consequently, stakeholder structures themselves become a source of differentiation between multiple interconnected competitive domains.

Unlike the traditional understanding of the market as a space for the exchange of goods and services, competitive domains represent analytically distinguishable spaces of competition for different forms of resources, legitimacy, trust, knowledge, and adaptive capacity.

This logic largely corresponds with the development of stakeholder-oriented approaches [57; 56], resource dependence theory [65], institutional theory [54], as well as knowledge-based and dynamic capability perspectives [64; 75]. More recent studies additionally emphasize the growing importance of ecosystems, resilience, legitimacy, and sustainability-oriented organizational adaptation [31; 80].

Within these approaches, organizational sustainability depends not only on market efficiency, but additionally on the ability to secure access to critical resources, maintain institutional legitimacy, integrate into knowledge networks, and adapt to changing environmental conditions.

Several major stakeholder-derived domains of competition may be distinguished (table 5).

Product (service) domain is linked to competition for customers, market share, and the ability to generate value propositions. This domain traditionally constituted the primary focus of classical competitiveness theories [66].

Labor and talent domain emerges around competition for human capital, professional competencies, knowledge, and organizational capabilities. Within the knowledge economy, access to talent becomes one of the key determinants of long-term competitiveness [28; 18; 37; 40].

Reputation domain is connected with the organization’s ability to maintain societal trust, positive reputation, and social legitimacy. Under contemporary conditions, reputational resources become independent factors influencing the sustainability of competitive positions [41; 74].

Table 5

Stakeholder-derived domains of competition

Competitive Domain	Primary stakeholder group	Core object of competition	Strategic function
Product (service) domain	Customers	Market value and customer preference	Revenue generation and market position
Labor and talent domain	Employees and professionals	Human capital, competencies, talent attraction	Adaptive and innovation capacity
Reputation domain	Society, media, stakeholders	Trust, reputation, social legitimacy	Long-term stakeholder support
Institutional domain	Regulators, public institutions	Institutional legitimacy and compliance	Stability and environmental adaptability
Knowledge and innovation domain	Academia, innovation networks, partners	Knowledge, technologies, innovation access	Dynamic capabilities and renewal
Societal impact domain	Communities, society, future stakeholders	Societal value and sustainability legitimacy	Long-term viability and societal acceptance

Institutional domain includes interactions with regulators, public institutions, and normative environments [41]. The ability to maintain institutional legitimacy and adapt to changing regulatory expectations becomes an essential element of organizational sustainability [54].

Knowledge and innovation domain develops around access to knowledge, technologies, research networks, and innovation ecosystems. Under conditions of rapid technological transformation, the ability to integrate into interorganizational knowledge networks becomes an important source of adaptive capacity [31; 64; 69].

Finally, societal impact domain is associated with the organization's ability to maintain societal relevance, comply with evolving societal expectations, and generate positive impact on the broader social environment. This domain becomes more and more important under the expansion of ESG-oriented governance models and sustainability frameworks [61].

Importantly, these domains do not function independently from one another. On the contrary, mechanisms of mutual reinforcement and cross-domain dependence emerge between them.

Strong reputational legitimacy facilitates the attraction of talent and investment resources [74]; advanced human capital strengthens organizational innovation potential [40]; institutional legitimacy increases organizational resilience under conditions of environmental uncertainty [54; 80]; while integration into knowledge and innovation networks enhances adaptive capacity and persistent organizational viability [31; 64; 75].

As a result, competitiveness becomes less determined by isolated advantages within a single market and more dependent on the organization's ability to maintain viable positions simultaneously across several interconnected stakeholder-derived domains.

Consequently, sustainable competitiveness emerges as the organization's capacity to ensure the long-term coordination of resources, legitimacy, stakeholder relationships, and adaptive capabilities within a system of multiple competitive domains.

Sustainable competitiveness emerges from the organization's ability to maintain long-term systemic viability across multiple stakeholder-derived domains over time.

One of the key limitations of classical stakeholder logic lies in its predominantly synchronic character. Most existing stakeholder-oriented approaches focus primarily on current stakeholder groups and contemporary configurations of organizational relationships. Even when long-term organizational performance is considered, the analytical focus generally remains concentrated on present actors participating in existing economic, institutional, or social interactions.

However, the logic of sustainable development inherently presupposes intertemporal responsibility. In the report of the World Commission on Environment

and Development, sustainable development is defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [81]. This definition fundamentally expands the temporal boundaries of organizational responsibility and introduces a diachronic dimension into sustainability-related analysis.

Subsequent sustainability-oriented approaches further developed this intertemporal logic through the institutionalization of long-term societal objectives within global sustainability governance frameworks, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [71; 78]. So, sustainability becomes understood not only in association with environmental protection or social responsibility, but with the long-term coordination of economic, institutional, societal, and intergenerational interests.

From this perspective, sustainability transforms stakeholder logic from a predominantly synchronic framework into a diachronic one. Organizations are required to consider the expectations and interests of current stakeholders, along with the long-term consequences of their decisions for future social, institutional, economic, and environmental conditions. Such transformation reflects the broader shift toward risk-oriented and sustainability-oriented governance models characteristic of contemporary complex societies [39].

Importantly, future generations cannot be interpreted as stakeholders in the traditional managerial sense. Unlike conventional stakeholder groups, future generations:

– do not directly participate in market exchange;

– cannot exercise immediate bargaining power;

– are unable to engage in current organizational interactions;

– and do not possess direct mechanisms of representation within contemporary governance systems.

Nevertheless, the interests of future generations become more institutionalized through sustainability-oriented normative frameworks, public policy mechanisms, ESG standards, climate governance structures, sustainability reporting systems, and international sustainability agendas [38; 78].

Within this logic, future generations may therefore be interpreted not as direct stakeholders in the conventional sense, but as a normative meta-stakeholder whose interests are indirectly represented through institutional and sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs, climate agreements, sustainability reporting standards, and broader societal expectations regarding long-term responsibility.

This interpretation substantially expands the traditional understanding of competitiveness. Sustainable competitiveness thus includes not only the organization's ability to maintain current competitive positions, but its capacity to preserve long-term social and institutional legitimacy under conditions of changing societal expectations and intergenerational responsibility.

Consequently, sustainability introduces a fundamentally new temporal dimension into competitiveness analysis, focusing on both current market efficiency and long-term viability of organizational systems capable of coordinating present stakeholder interests with future societal and environmental constraints.

Under such conditions, sustainable competitiveness may be interpreted as the organization's ability to maintain adaptive, legitimate, and socially acceptable positions over extended temporal horizons while preserving the capacity of future systems, stakeholders, and societies to sustain their own development trajectories.

Thus, future generations become indirectly embedded into competitiveness analysis through sustainability-oriented governance systems and institutionalized societal expectations.

Within the proposed approach, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should not be interpreted as a separate competitive domain alongside product, labor, institutional, or knowledge domains. Such an interpretation would excessively

simplify the nature of sustainable development and reduce the SDGs to merely another space of competitive rivalry.

In reality, the SDGs perform a substantially more complex function of normative coordination and institutionalization of long-term expectations regarding organizational behavior. Unlike stakeholder-derived domains, which represent spaces of competition for different forms of resources, legitimacy, and adaptive capacity, the SDGs establish a universalized normative framework within which economic, social, environmental, and intertemporal interests are coordinated.

This logic largely corresponds with contemporary sustainability governance approaches, which interpret sustainable development not as a separate direction of organizational activity, but as a mechanism for integrating long-term societal expectations into strategic and institutional governance processes [71; 78].

SDGs effectively perform the function of institutional representation of the interests of future generations, which are unable to participate directly in current market and stakeholder interactions. In this sense, the SDGs operate as a mechanism for translating intergenerational responsibility into contemporary organizational governance systems.

Accordingly, the SDGs institutionalize:

– long-term societal expectations;
– sustainability-oriented governance principles;
– intergenerational responsibility;
– normative constraints on organizational behavior;
– criteria of social and environmental legitimacy.

Consequently, sustainable competitiveness should be interpreted not as a form of “long-term market efficiency,” but as the organization’s ability to maintain adaptive and legitimate positions under conditions of increasing normative complexity within the contemporary institutional environment.

Within this logic, the SDGs perform not the function of an independent competitive space, but rather the role of a meta-governance framework coordinating stakeholder expectations, sustainability requirements, and long-term societal constraints. Table 6 illustrates the stakeholder-derived competitive domains and the SDGs as a normative coordination framework.

Table 6

Stakeholder-derived competitive domains and the SDGs as a normative coordination framework

Analytical element	Primary function	Nature of interaction	Strategic role
Product (service) domain	Competition for customers and market value	Competitive	Market positioning and revenue generation
Labor and talent domain	Competition for human capital	Competitive	Adaptive and innovation capacity
Reputation domain	Competition for trust and legitimacy	Competitive (relational)	Long-term stakeholder support
Institutional domain	Competition for institutional legitimacy	Competitive or regulatory	Environmental adaptability
Knowledge and innovation domain	Competition for knowledge and technologies	Competitive or / and collaborative	Dynamic capabilities and renewal
Societal impact domain	Competition for societal legitimacy	Relational and normative	Social sustainability
SDGs framework	Coordination of long-term expectations	Normative and institutional	Sustainability governance and legitimacy coordination

As demonstrated in the table 5, stakeholder-derived domains describe various spaces of competitive interaction, whereas the SDGs form a suprasystemic normative architecture of sustainable development coordination. For this reason, the SDGs should not be interpreted as an independent competitive domain. Their primary function consists in institutionalizing long-term criteria of sustainability, legitimacy, and intergenerational responsibility within contemporary organizational governance systems.

Thus, the SDGs institutionalize societal and intergenerational expectations within organizational governance systems, transforming sustainable competitiveness from a predominantly market-centered category into a multilayered system of long-term adaptive and normative coordination.

The proposed interpretation of sustainable competitiveness integrates stakeholder structures, multidomain competition, adaptive governance, legitimacy, and intergenerational responsibility into a unified conceptual framework. Table 7 summarizes the principal structural components of sustainable competitiveness and their functions according to the proposed theoretical model.

Table 7

Principal structural components of sustainable competitiveness and their functions according to the proposed theoretical model

Conceptual component	Functional role	Contribution to sustainable competitiveness
Stakeholder Structures	Generate differentiated organizational expectations and resource dependencies	Expand competitiveness beyond product-market interaction
Stakeholder-Derived Domains	Create multiple interconnected spaces of competition	Enable multidomain adaptive positioning
Adaptive Governance	Coordinate stakeholder relationships and organizational adaptation	Support persistent organizational viability
Dynamic Capabilities	Ensure continuous adaptation and renewal under environmental change	Maintain competitiveness over time
Institutional Legitimacy	Align organizational behavior with societal and institutional expectations	Preserve stability and stakeholder support
Reputation and Trust	Facilitate access to stakeholders, resources, and social support	Strengthen cross-domain reinforcement mechanisms
Knowledge and Innovation Networks	Provide access to knowledge, technologies, and innovation ecosystems	Enhance adaptive and innovation capacity
Temporal and Intergenerational Orientation	Incorporate long-term consequences into organizational decision-making	Extend competitiveness beyond short-term efficiency

Conceptual component	Functional role	Contribution to sustainable competitiveness
Future Generations as Normative Meta-Stakeholder	Represent intertemporal societal expectations and sustainability constraints	Introduce diachronic legitimacy into competitiveness
SDGs as a Normative Coordination Framework	Institutionalize sustainability-oriented governance principles	Coordinate stakeholder expectations and intergenerational responsibility

As demonstrated in the proposed framework, sustainable competitiveness emerges not from isolated competitive advantages or short-term market efficiency, but from the organization's systemic ability to coordinate stakeholder relationships, maintain institutional legitimacy, adapt to environmental change, and integrate long-term societal and intergenerational expectations into governance processes.

As a result, competitiveness acquires the characteristics of a multidimensional adaptive capability extending beyond traditional product-market logic. Sustainable competitiveness therefore reflects the long-term viability of adaptive organizational systems capable of maintaining legitimate and competitive positions simultaneously across multiple interconnected stakeholder-derived domains.

Conclusion. The conducted study demonstrates that the concept of competitiveness is undergoing a substantial conceptual transformation under conditions of increasing economic, technological, institutional, and societal complexity. Contemporary competitiveness extends beyond traditional product-market efficiency and becomes associated with adaptive governance, stakeholder coordination, legitimacy maintenance, and long-term systemic viability.

The analysis of existing approaches to competitiveness and sustainable competitiveness revealed the gradual expansion of competitiveness discourse from predominantly market-oriented interpretations toward more systemic, multidimensional, and sustainability-oriented perspectives. At the same time, the study demonstrates that contemporary research still lacks a sufficiently integrated and conceptually coherent interpretation of sustainable competitiveness.

The proposed framework substantiates that sustainable competitiveness should not be interpreted as a universal property applicable to all competitive objects. Unlike elemental objects such as products, services, technologies, or individual innovations, sustainable competitiveness can emerge only within adaptive systems possessing temporal continuity, stakeholder heterogeneity, governance capacity, institutional legitimacy, and the ability to coordinate resources and interests over extended time horizons.

On this basis, the paper proposes a stakeholder-based and multidomain interpretation of sustainable competitiveness. Within this perspective, competitiveness is understood not merely as the ability to achieve superiority within product-market interaction, but as the organization's capacity to maintain sustainable organizational positioning simultaneously across multiple stakeholder-derived domains.

Accordingly, competitiveness emerges as a multidomain adaptive capability rooted in stakeholder coordination, legitimacy maintenance, and persistent viability. Particular attention is devoted to the temporal and intergenerational dimension of sustainable competitiveness. The study argues that sustainability transforms stakeholder logic from a predominantly synchronic framework into a diachronic one oriented toward long-term intertemporal responsibility. Within this perspective, future generations may be interpreted as a normative meta-stakeholder whose interests become institutionally represented through sustainability governance frameworks and long-term societal expectations.

An important result of the study is the interpretation of the Sustainable Development Goals not as an independent competitive domain, but as a normative coordination framework institutionalizing sustainability principles, stakeholder expectations, and intergenerational responsibility within contemporary governance systems.

Accordingly, sustainable competitiveness may be interpreted as a systemic property of adaptive organizations capable of maintaining legitimate and competitive positions across multiple stakeholder-derived domains while incorporating long-term societal and intergenerational expectations into governance processes.

This interpretation reflects an attempt to integrate fragmented sustainability-oriented approaches into a more coherent multidimensional understanding of competitiveness. At the same time, the proposed conceptual framework does not claim to constitute a complete or finalized theory of sustainable competitiveness. Rather, it should be understood as a theoretical foundation for the further development of stakeholder-oriented, governance-oriented, and sustainability-based competitiveness research.

Future development of the sustainable competitiveness concept may be associated with:

– operationalization of multidomain sustainable competitiveness;

– development of sustainable competitiveness indicators and assessment methodologies;

– empirical validation of stakeholder-derived competitive domains;

– investigation of cross-domain reinforcement mechanisms;

– integration of ESG and sustainability metrics into competitiveness assessment systems;

– development of applied sustainable competitiveness models for organizations, regions, and national economies;

– further elaboration of intergenerational governance approaches within sustainability-oriented management systems.

Overall, the proposed theoretical reinterpretation of sustainable competitiveness makes it possible to conceptualize competitiveness as a multilayered system of adaptive and normative coordination extending substantially beyond the boundaries of traditional product-market logic.

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