

ENTERPRISE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AS A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CATEGORY

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In the current globalized business environment, enterprises are confronted with dual pressures from intensifying cross-border competition and disruptive technological innovations (such as artificial intelligence and digital transformation). The ability to develop and maintain competitive advantage has become the fundamental guarantee for enterprises to break through development bottlenecks, improve market share, and achieve sustainable growth.

Different scholars, based on their own research fields and practical observations, interpret the connotation of enterprise competitive advantage from multiple perspectives such as resources, strategy, capabilities, and value creation. These differentiated definitions not only reflect the core contradictions of enterprise competition in different periods but also provide diverse perspectives for subsequent theoretical integration and practical application. Through morphological analysis, systematically reviewing the core elements, logical frameworks, and applicable scenarios of these definitions can effectively clarify the concept boundaries, avoid cognitive biases in theoretical research, and lay a solid conceptual foundation for constructing the theoretical system of enterprise competitive advantage development.

Porter [4] believed “the competitive advantage of an enterprise comes from the value created for customers more than its cost, that is, the enterprise can provide products and services with equal or higher value to competitors at a lower cost, so as to stand out in the market”. The core logic of defining competitive advantage from the dual dimension of “value-cost” revolves around the balance between “cost leadership” and “value output”, emphasizing the cost performance advantage in market competition, which is suitable for industry-level competitive strategy analysis, such as manufacturing, retail and other fields that pay attention to the matching of cost and value. Competitive advantage comes from three strategic models: cost leadership, specialization (focus) and differentiation. Cost leadership reduces costs through supply chain optimization, specialization focuses on specific markets, and differentiation forms barriers through unique products/services.

Barney [2] stated competitive advantage is possible when “the potential competitors cannot copy the enterprise's value creation strategy, the enterprise has a competitive advantage, highlighting the uniqueness and non-replicability of the strategy”. Tong Zhenheng [5] defined competitive advantage as “the position and strength of an enterprise relative to its competitors in market competition, which includes not only objective conditions, but also the ability to accumulate, combine and apply resources”. By taking into account both “objective conditions” and “subjective capabilities”, this study for the first time explicitly incorporates “resource operation” into the definition of competitive advantage, emphasizing the combination of “static status” and “dynamic resource management”. It makes up for the previous shortcomings in the definition that only focused on external competition results while ignoring internal resource processes. This approach is applicable to resource-dependent enterprises (such as resource extraction and chemical industries).

According to Yi Shun & Han Jiangbo [6], “The competitive advantage of an enterprise (the dimension of international competitiveness) is reflected in the ability to occupy market share and obtain long-term profits, and its essence is the efficiency of transforming resources into market and profits”. While Gong Yalin et al. [3] believe “patented technology is the basic resource of enterprise competitive advantage”. Focusing on the specific carrier of “technical resources”, the patented technology is directly defined as the “basic resource” of competitive advantage, highlighting the supporting role of technical barriers to competitive advantage, which is applicable to high-tech enterprises, but the definition scope is relatively focused, and does not cover the source of competitive advantage of non-technology enterprises.

"Sustainability" is an important attribute of competitive advantage. Except for Porter's definition which did not explicitly mention sustainability, other scholars all regarded "long-term stable advantages" as a core element - Barney's "VRIO characteristics" directly guarantees sustainability with "difficult-to-imitate nature"; Tong Zhenheng's "dynamic advantages" emphasizes maintaining advantages through continuous resource accumulation and application capabilities; Yi Shun et al.'s "long-term profit acquisition ability" directly incorporates the time dimension into the definition; Gong Yalin et al.'s "patent technology legal protection". This commonality indicates that short-term advantages (such as short-term promotional market share increase) are not the true competitive advantages of enterprises; only advantages that can be sustained over the long term and cannot be replicated by competitors can support the continuous development of enterprises [1].

Moreover, "value creation" is the ultimate goal of competitive advantage. The definitions of all scholars implicitly contain the logic of "value creation" - Porter's "customer value and profit margin", Barney's "resource value", Tong Zhenheng's "combined advantageous position", Yi Shun et al.'s "market share and profit", Gong Yalin et al.'s "market position and profit growth", Yu Dengke et al.'s "strategy implementation effect", essentially are different manifestations of enterprises creating value. This commonality indicates that competitive advantage is not an empty concept, but needs to be demonstrated through creating actual value for customers and the enterprise itself (such as customers obtaining high-quality products and the enterprise obtaining profit growth). "Advantages" that do not involve value creation (such as simply technological leadership but unable to be transformed into market results) cannot truly support the competitive position of enterprises.

From the perspective of differences, the core distinction lies in the different emphases of the research perspectives, which can be divided into such types. The first type is the "external orientation perspective", represented by Porter and Yu Dengke. This perspective emphasizes that the acquisition of competitive advantage depends on the external market environment and strategic choices, and believes that enterprises should analyze the industry competition structure or choose appropriate strategic models (cost leadership, specialization, differentiation) to find their own advantageous positioning in the external market.

The second category is the "internal orientation perspective", represented by Barney and Gong Yalin. This perspective focuses on internal resources and capabilities of the enterprise, believing that the fundamental source of competitive advantage is the heterogeneous resources owned by the enterprise (such as Barney's VRIO resources, Gong Yalin's patented technology), and the external market environment is only the scenario for converting resources into advantages.

These commonalities and differences indicate that enterprise competitive advantage is a multi-dimensional, dynamically evolving concept, and there is no unique definition standard. In subsequent theoretical research and practical applications, it is necessary to combine the industry characteristics, development stage, and resource endowment of the enterprise, and comprehensively apply the definitions of different perspectives to more accurately understand and construct enterprise competitive advantage.

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