

An Assessment of the Concept of Competitiveness through Postgraduate Thesis Studies in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT The understanding of the concept of competitiveness and its transformation into a subject of research has become an interesting field both in practice and in theoretical frameworks. As emphasised in academic articles, textbooks, and papers, competitiveness also emerges as an evaluation and comparison tool in reports prepared for the analysis of local and regional areas, as well as in comparisons made at the global and national levels. In this study, we sought to investigate how the concept is approached in postgraduate programs, in which areas studies on competitiveness are conducted, whether the concept is addressed with a correct positioning, and what the method-output relationship is for the results obtained. It was observed that the concept is used in place of concepts such as 'competitive advantage' and 'competitive superiority,' and that the Porter Five Forces Model is predominantly used for the outputs obtained. It was also noted that the outputs are included in the recommendations related to the thesis topic within the context of competitiveness, and that these are mostly encountered in doctoral theses, while certain gaps and evaluations regarding competitiveness are not made.

KEYWORDS

Competitiveness
Postgraduate the-
sis
Competitive ad-
vantage
Strategic analy-
sis

INTRODUCTION

While the concept of competition is built on establishing superiority, different interpretations, methods, and tools come to the fore in determining what constitutes superiority (Heseltine 1994). Competitive conditions in sports do not lead researchers to the same conclusions as competition between companies in the market. Competition arises from living beings' dependence on resources, describing a distinct interaction with their environment. Competition in the political arena (Stigler 1972), competition within the extended family, or competition among students within a class is a type of competition that must be understood in its own context. Their common feature is the achievement of superiority, but the legal context of these relationships is the subject of considerable debate (Peter 2009).

To understand how the process can be defined and what results can be achieved by going beyond competition, it is necessary to analyse the relationships between actors. In other words, it is necessary to learn and measure competitiveness (Talani 2017; Klein and Newby 2017). Competitiveness demonstrates the level of success of actors in achieving goals or objectives, which include sustainability and are defined by the power to compete while using methods and tools (Bredrup 1995). Competitiveness includes utilising innovation, effectiveness, and transformation. In this context, it is easier to understand why Porter (Porter 1985, 1990) focused on competitiveness at the national and firm levels, why

De Bono (De Bono 2019) linked the success of a rising company to competitiveness, and why competitiveness is considered more important than growth and/or development in measuring success in the global world.

While competition reveals the existence of a race, competitiveness describes the actors who know why the race is taking place and who take action to achieve a goal by considering the nature of the arena. Competition is inherent in the nature of existence. Competitiveness manifests itself through abilities, skills, methods, and tools (Vlcek *et al.* 1997). Competition brings superiority, and competitiveness brings leadership. This explains why the economies and companies of countries that neither act on the nature of competition nor are competitive are performing poorly. Indeed, when growth figures or economic development rankings in global reports are evaluated on a country-by-country competitive scale, interesting differences emerge (Mytelka 1999; Turkey 2021; Ilchenko *et al.* 2021). If being the largest does not imply competitiveness, meaning when rankings related to economic size are compared with those of competitive countries, success in terms of sustainability is more prevalent among competitive countries than large ones. The same is true for companies. Especially in globalisation, the value of competitiveness in terms of how companies should act has attracted the attention of many researchers. While those who are effective in methods and tools surpass larger competitors' success, those who believe that growth is a necessity are forced to exert more effort to keep up with the competitive ones (Ernst and Haar 2019; Rudianto 2009; Chaudhuri and Ray 1997).

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When considering competitiveness as a measure, it is argued that it should be considered in five different dimensions (Chaudhuri and Ray 1997; Gutium 2018):

1) **Firm level:** The evaluation of firm competitiveness involves a complex evaluation process considering many factors. Porter (Porter 1990; Ketels 2006) explains this through cost and differentiation, while also revealing how a firm should formulate a strategy for competitiveness through these two concepts. In addition, an analysis based on the value chain can be used to examine how various variables such as product, price, technology, innovation, international marketing power, human resources, structural characteristics, production technologies affect the market advantages and disadvantages for a company, thus impacting competitiveness (Fagerberg 1988; Erkut and Albayrak 2010; Hult 2012; Lado and Wilson 1994; Lekovic and Cvetanovic 2012; Do et al. 2021).

2) **City:** Cities have historically been pioneers of productivity, progress, and growth. They will continue to be of vital importance for the growth and competitiveness of countries and regions in the future. This is particularly true in the context of rapid and mass urbanisation in developing markets, therefore, it should be recognised that cities have become the new focus of competitiveness. Six global ‘megatrends’ are particularly important for cities: (1) urbanisation, demographics and the emerging middle class; (2) increasing inequality; (3) sustainability; (4) technological change; (5) industrial clusters and global value chains; and (6) governance. Led by urbanisation, these trends are shaping the overall operating environment of cities worldwide. It is the responsibility of cities to capitalise on these megatrends and mitigate their negative effects, such as increasing inequality, pressure on natural resources and the environment, and declining trust in public authorities. This brings the competitiveness of cities to the forefront.

The competitiveness of cities is defined as the factors (policies, institutions, strategies, and processes) that determine a city’s level of sustainable productivity. Sustainability encompasses economic, environmental, and social issues. Efficiency refers to the effective use of existing resources to achieve economic growth. However, efficiency must be sustainable and maintained in the long term, reconciling economic, environmental, and social goals rather than in the short term. A four-part classification of city competitiveness has been developed: (1) institutions, (2) policies and regulations related to the business environment, (3) ‘hard connections,’ and (4) ‘soft connections’ (Begg 1999; Forum 2014; Kamiya and Pengfei 2021).

3) **Regional level:** Numerous examples, such as Third Italy, Bavaria, Sophia Antipolis, Shenzhen, and Tennessee Valley, demonstrate what it means to address competitiveness at the regional level using different models. The specialisations or development models of regions are giving competitiveness a new meaning, highlighting the quality of regional capabilities, human resources, social capital accumulation, and various forms of cooperation for competitiveness. Researchers working in many different fields, such as economics, business, sociology, urban and regional planning, and political science, examine the relationship between these concepts using different methods and tools, and make important recommendations for policymakers. One of the most well-known examples is Putnam’s study, which sought to understand development in

northern Italy and presented a new model of development and competitiveness. Porter, on the other hand, has examined regional competitiveness, particularly through cluster models, in many of his studies. The studies conducted seek to discover new examples using different criteria and evaluations, learn about new actors playing a role in development and growth, and discuss what needs to be learned and done for competitiveness based on the new models discovered or proposed. This also facilitates the development and use of indices that enable comparisons across multiple topics (OECD 1997; Dijkstra et al. 2023; Commission 2022; Enright 2000; Maskell and Malmberg 1999).

4) **At the sectoral level:** Sectoral comparison can be approached in two dimensions. The first involves comparing the same sector across different countries, while the second aims to compare different sectors based on parameters that constitute the sectors (labour force, energy, exports, purchasing power, etc.). Both are important for competitiveness assessments. The former contributes to comparative advantage as a well-known method for national competitiveness, while the latter contributes to determining which sectors will make the city, region, and even the nation competitive. In other words, sectoral competitiveness reveals which sectoral dynamics provide advantages over others and how disadvantaged sectors can be improved. In this context, sectoral competitiveness analyses serve as a guide for dynamic strategies (Kancs and Kielyte 2001; Esposito and Collignon 2017).

5) **At the national level:** When examining the origins of competitiveness, it is likely that national competitiveness is the oldest domain for measurement and the area where the most research has been conducted. The competitiveness of nations and competitive economies, which have come to the fore with the process of globalisation, is expected to become more prominent, providing a rich field of study for academic researchers. The World Competitiveness Forum’s thesis that “An economy’s competitiveness cannot be reduced to just its GDP and productivity; political, social and cultural dimensions are a reality for enterprises, too. Governments play a crucial role by providing an environment characterised by efficient infrastructure, institutions and policies that can encourage sustainable value creation on the part of enterprises.” This thesis is now accepted by all global actors. At the same time, this thesis reveals which competitive skills nations must possess and how to achieve a priority that is independent of economic size and noteworthy (Center 2024; Deloitte 2024; Schwab and Zahidi 2020).

In this context, it is important to understand what academic studies and researchers are investigating through the concept and what they have achieved, as this helps to establish context. The aforementioned distinction provides specific guidance on understanding and approaches to competitiveness in that country. In this study, thesis studies related to competitiveness were examined from the Thesis Database in Türkiye, and we attempted to understand the perception, evaluation, and interpretation of competitiveness in Türkiye, through content analysis.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Analysis of Postgraduate Theses on Competitiveness in Türkiye

Postgraduate theses were utilised and analysed based on a conceptual examination, literature review of the theoretical framework, identification of objectives/problems, research and recommendations, following a search of the thesis database.

Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to analyse the context in which the concept of 'competitiveness' in Türkiye is perceived, valued, and analysed in the academic field, based on postgraduate studies conducted on 'competitiveness.'

Research Method, Scope, and Sample

The thesis studies examined in the research were analysed in terms of conceptual structure, literature and application context, within the framework of the solutions reached and the recommendations presented. Descriptive content analysis was used. Descriptive content analysis method means that qualitative and quantitative studies conducted independently from each other in a particular subject or field are examined and organized in depth. Thus, general trends in that subject or area are determined. The results obtained in this method are expected to guide the planned studies in the future towards the targeted subjects. The main purpose of this study is to solve the questions about how to analyze the descriptive content analysis method, which is frequently used in the field of educational sciences, in order to be used in other social sciences.

The study aims to guide academicians who want to use descriptive content analysis in the field of social sciences and to be a basic resource. In the descriptive content analysis, especially in the analysis of the aims, reasons, results and suggestions of the studied studies, creating a code pool in accordance with the qualitative analysis approaches and using the appropriate theming/categorization method will ensure that the descriptive content analysis studies are enriched in terms of quality. In addition, in the descriptive content analysis studies to be carried out, the studied studies should be analyzed from different aspects in order to distinguish them from other descriptive content analysis studies on similar topics, apart from the standardized analysis stages (Ültay *et al.* 2021). The results obtained were classified. The conceptual structure, application correspondence, realism, and analysis of the recommendations presented were analyzed. Additionally, the meaningfulness of the postgraduate studies was explored.

The following questions were sought to be answered in order to interpret the studies:

- How are the main problems/issues perceived?
- How were the solutions/solutions, suggestions/recommendations and context established?

To this end, data (all postgraduate theses) were collected and included in the analysis. A search was conducted using the keyword 'competitiveness' in the Higher Education Council (YÖK) National Thesis Centre. Since the aim was to have the same population and sample, 57 of the 57 registered postgraduate (master's and doctoral as of 01.05.2025) theses were accessed. 66.6% of the postgraduate studies examined are master's theses, while the remaining 33.3% are doctoral theses. Research on the concept began relatively late, in 2007, with a noticeable increase in 2019 and thereafter. When considering the fields of study, Business Administration, Economics,

and Tourism stand out, along with Industrial Engineering, Urban and Regional Planning, and International Trade.

Although the studies reveal different sectoral distributions, it is seen that competitiveness is most researched, analysed, and understood in the tourism sector. Apart from this, the textile sector is considered interesting, and the competitiveness of the construction sector has also attracted attention. From a regional perspective, studies have been conducted in the Southeast and Mediterranean regions, Mediterranean, Black Sea, and outside Istanbul, and research has been carried out on the international competitiveness of sectors and with the aim of reaching conclusions through comparisons. The studies also highlight the work of foreign students pursuing postgraduate studies in Türkiye on their own regions and focus on the accuracy of the models. Additionally, structural analyses of clustering and competitive models are among the primary research tools used in the studies.

In the analysis, the Diamond Model developed by Porter is widely used, along with the Balassa Model, AHP, Statistical and Econometric models, and Panel Data Analysis. Three studies, one on political history, another on education, and finally on women's competitiveness, were excluded from this study as they fall outside its scope. While primary sources based on field research are widely used, secondary data sources, particularly reports and indices developed on competition, form the dataset for studies on competitiveness.

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

As can be seen, a comprehensive field study on the status of thesis topic within the context of competitiveness in Türkiye has emerged. The issues focused on in the theses studied, and the results and recommendations obtained, constitute the focus of our study in terms of the academic perspective on family businesses.

Evaluation of the Geography-Based Analysis Process of Competitiveness

When the thesis studies are evaluated based on the classification made regarding the understanding, measurement, and evaluation of competitiveness, one study indicates that a single study conducted on the TOGG example provides an analysis at the firm level. In addition, there are 14 analyses conducted primarily based on sectors, 5 region-based studies, 10 sectoral studies, 5 studies on national competitiveness, and 20 studies in other categories without distinction between master's and doctoral studies).

Firm-based competitiveness appears to be approached based on the premise that the brand and the firm are the same. Yılmazcam (2022) examined TOGG's competitiveness through Porter's Diamond Model (Porter 1985, 1990). Various thesis studies have attempted to examine how a city's sectoral capabilities determine its competitiveness (Begg 1999; Forum 2014; Kamiya and Pengfei 2021). These studies focus on the assumed capabilities of cities and the nature of sectors believed to provide a competitive advantage.

Although region-based studies are limited (Dijkstra *et al.* 2023; Commission 2022), it is also observed that there is no common standard in the selection of regions. Studies conducted by Development Agencies may serve as a guide; however, it should not be forgotten that these studies were conducted within a specific time frame and should be considered in light of changing environmental conditions, including earthquakes, COVID-19, and other similar factors.

When studies are examined in a sectoral context, researchers such as Baran (2021) in the olive oil sector, Kayan (2021) in defence, and others have conducted studies on competitiveness in various

■ **Table 1** Distribution of Postgraduate Theses on Competitiveness in Türkiye (2007-2025)

Year	Master's	Doctoral	Total	Field(s)
2007	2	0	2	Business Admin. / Architecture
2009	1	0	1	Industrial Engineering
2010	0	1	1	Econometrics
2011	1	0	1	Economics
2013	1	0	1	Economics
2014	2	1	3	Construction / Tourism / Urban and Regional Planning
2015	2	1	3	Tourism / Business Admin. / Tourism
2016	1	2	3	Economics / Business Admin. / Tourism
2017	1	2	3	Geography / Urban and Regional Planning / Economics
2018	2	1	3	Political Science / Business Admin. / Business Admin.
2019	7	2	9	Public Admin. / Business Admin. / Tourism / Industrial Eng. / Business Admin.
2020	2	1	3	Business Admin. / Business Admin. / Business Admin.
2021	4	2	6	Urban / Civil Aviation / Economics / Tourism / Business Admin. / Economics
2022	5	0	5	Economics / Business Admin. / Economics / Economics / Economics
2023	1	3	4	Economics / Business Admin. / Tourism / Economics
2024	4	2	6	Int. Trade / Business Admin. / Industrial Eng. / Econometrics / Industrial Eng. / Business Admin.
2025	2	1	3	Int. Trade / Education / Business Admin.
TOTAL	38	19	57	

sectors (Kancs and Kielyte 2001; Esposito and Collignon 2017). To answer the question of in what context Türkiye has a competitive advantage, works by Özçalık (2010), Dalkıran (2019), and Ülken (2007) were analyzed (Porter 1985, 1990; Dijkstra *et al.* 2023; Schwab and Zahidi 2020). Among various studies on competitiveness, the effects of culture and innovation, econometric studies, and the relationship between education, per capita income, and other variables with competitiveness have been analyzed (Gutium 2018; Ketels 2006; Fagerberg 1988).

A Critical Approach to Analyses and Searches

Master's and doctoral theses conducted during the specified period (2007-2025) were examined, specifically analyzing how the concept was analysed, how it was addressed according to classification, and how the context was determined.

The transformation of the concept of competitiveness and its historical development in relation to various parameters and variables has not been sufficiently examined in many studies. The question of how competitiveness should be approached in relation to competition and defined in various contexts concerning economic, political, and social developments has not been discussed in a multidisciplinary manner. For example, the impact of resource

dependence on competitiveness or how competitiveness varies across the globe through organizational ecology has not been sufficiently studied. When limited studies with specific themes are not taken into account, the transformation of competitiveness through events like the impact of the 1973 oil crisis or liberalisation, the acquisition of a new dimension with globalisation, the emergence of a new form of competitiveness among global companies, how the ethical and legal forms of competitiveness should be interpreted in the new economy, the place of the concept in the search for a new balance in the world after the 2001 crisis, and the search for the counterpart of competitiveness during and after the Covid process remain unexamined. Even when searching for 'competitiveness and Covid' on Scholar 413,000 results are obtained however, the absence of any research on this correlation is striking (accessed on May 16, 2025).

When examining methods for measuring competitiveness, it is observed that certain methods defined in the literature stand out, while innovative methods are not widely used. No studies have been found that develop methods for competitiveness from the perspectives of sectoral and city competitiveness.

In urban competitiveness, the relationship between a sector and other sectors within the city has not been examined. The analyses

conducted on cities do not fully reflect city-based competitiveness studies. On the other hand, the fact that the analyses do not include a strategy proposal, either that comparisons with other cities regarding city-sector relations are not made in a complete or sufficient manner, reveals the shortcomings of competitiveness studies. Furthermore, the reasons for selecting the sector in the city, the references related to this, and the past performance of this sector have not been presented.

The studies conducted for the region and carried out on a sectoral basis contain similarities to these criticisms. It is evident that the extremely limited number of studies, regardless of the model and method used, requires more in-depth interpretations of the assessments related to national and regional activities. In other words, it would be useful to assess the future of the sector in terms of competitiveness and to highlight its contribution to the country's economy.

The analyses under this heading go beyond assessing competitiveness in a specific area and include suggestions to enhance competitiveness. The impact of factors such as culture, innovation, participation, decision-making, and specific institutional approval on competitiveness can be considerable. In addition, studies have been conducted on regions such as Gaza, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Commonwealth of Independent States and mathematical and econometric models have been used to measure international competitiveness, as well as the competitiveness of clusters within countries.

CONCLUSION

Seeking answers to practical problems in academic studies is important for concretising the ongoing debate between these two dimensions. In this context, a search of the YÖK Thesis Database using the keyword 'competition' reveals that 2,568 theses have been conducted since 1993. When searching for "competitive strength", it was found that 476 studies were initiated in 1989. It was determined that two thesis studies on 'competitive advantage' were conducted in 2007, and 152 thesis records on the same topic were found starting in 1999. Competitiveness appears in only 57 thesis titles, and it is noteworthy that studies began as late as 2007.

Although the concept has been researched and measured by Porter, its being addressed so late seems to be related to the existence of other concepts used in its place. This points to a problem in conceptualisation. In particular, the use of the term 'competitive power' instead of 'competitiveness' indicates a shift in terminology. This is a situation that arises from the translation. For example, for 'global competitive power,' the term 'global competitive power' is used, while "competitiveness" and 'competitive power' are used as synonyms in Turkish. To be clear, the difference between them is not very significant or easy to understand. Competitive power refers to the ability and accumulated resources of a structure to achieve superiority in competition to establish an objective or geographical measurement value. Competitiveness can be considered as the power to create an effect that will enable multiple actors to sustain their abilities to achieve defined goals in the competitive arena. While competitive strength contributes to explaining the cause of a result, competitiveness reveals the alignment and sustainable power of a company's or an organisation's capabilities.

In this context, city competitiveness is also emphasized, with a particular focus on the city's functions and economic characteristics in terms of competitive strength or advantage. Regional studies are generally based on classifications such as the TR-IBS distinction or KOP regions; however, these efforts are deemed insufficient. Notably, only one example directly examines compa-

nies, and even though these companies strive to become national and international brands, their competitiveness does not appear to attract significant academic interest. A similar lack of focus is observed in studies on national competitiveness. While research in fields such as business, economics, and tourism is more prominent, many studies from other disciplines primarily concentrate on methods and approaches related to competitiveness. Importantly, there is a clear absence of independent studies analyzing how the concept of competitiveness has evolved since the advent of Industry 4.0 in 2011 or the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and how this evolution should reshape the current discourse on competitiveness.

However, in addition to all these findings, the studies also include, albeit to a limited extent, efforts to produce effective solutions; discussions that critically question the practical meaning of concepts and offer suggestions by approaching competitiveness with a holistic understanding; theoretically comprehensive frameworks; and contributions to quantitative research through modeling and statistical evaluations. Postgraduate thesis studies, in particular, interrogate the concept of competitiveness along with its outputs and ontological foundations. The multidisciplinary nature of the concept further offers significant opportunities for expanded and in-depth future research.

Availability of data and material

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethical standard

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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