Collective Action and Business Competitiveness

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Abstract: This study aims to comprehensively review the extant literature examining the intricate relationship between collective action (CA) strategies employed within industrial contexts and the consequent impact on organizational competitiveness. Utilizing a systematic literature review methodology, this study meticulously identifies and synthesizes the challenges and solutions associated with CA. Additionally, it delineates various factors that influence business competitiveness in relation to collective action strategies. The analysis culminates in the development of a conceptual model that elucidates the dynamic interplay between collective action problems and strategies, alongside key business competitiveness factors. Furthermore, the study highlights the moderating role that governance structures can exert on this relationship. This review stands out in the literature due to its unique focus on the intersection of collective action strategies and organizational competitiveness. It addresses a gap in existing research by providing a comprehensive synthesis of these variables within the context of business environments. The study underscores the imperative for a more profound theoretical exploration of business-related collective action. It suggests a critical examination of the role that existing business associations play in enhancing or impeding the competitiveness of firms. By doing so, it offers valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers aiming to leverage collective action for competitive advantage. The comprehensive analysis offered in this review provides a robust framework for understanding the factors that drive the effectiveness of collective action strategies and their implications for business competitiveness. By identifying the challenges and solutions associated with collective action, as well as the business competitiveness factors influenced by these strategies, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the field. Additionally, the conceptual model proposed here highlights the crucial role of governance in moderating the relationship between collective action and competitiveness, offering a nuanced perspective that can inform both academic inquiry and practical implementation. Overall, this study provides a valuable foundation for future research and practice, emphasizing the importance of collective action in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage in the business world.

Keywords: Business competitiveness, Collective action, Governance, Innovation, Social capital, strategy

1. Introduction

The theme of CA, triggered by Olson (1965), has received the attention of several authors in different fields of knowledge. Similarly, business competitiveness has been approached from different perspectives, supported by different theoretical approaches, such as industrial economics (Porter, 1980) or resource-based view, RBV (Barney, 1991). However, the relationship between these two fields has yet to be the subject of attention by researchers. In this context, it is relevant to have a deeper understanding of the impact of CA strategies on business competitiveness.

With his seminal work *The Logic of Collective Action*, Olson (1965) established the conceptual foundations for research in the field of problems that emerge from the conflict between individual and collective rationality, seeking to define a general theory that explains the factors that affect CA, focusing on the study of organizations that provide collective goods. A collective good is the result of the action of a group focused on a common objective, for example, ensuring food security. Public goods are all those that observe the characteristics of non-exclusion and non-rivalry, as in the case of defining public policies (Olson, 1965) or the characteristics of an industry that have non-rival application to all companies in a sector (Barnett, 2006). Common-pool resources are characterized by their joint use by a particular group, whose exclusion from their use is problematic, (Ostrom, 1990). This subtraction distinguishes public goods problems from common-pool resources problems.

Organizations that provide collective goods can take on a diverse nature, such as unions, pressure groups, professional orders, various business associations, consortiums, or clubs, and can take on a formal or informal nature (Brito, 2001). To generate collective benefits, organizations generally rely on resources from their members or funds made available by government entities. Problems of CA in these organizations can arise when their members have the option of contributing or not to the generation of collective benefits.

The study of competitiveness has generally been approached at the macro level, which encompasses national, regional, or industry-wide issues (Porter, 1980), and addresses the company's competitiveness from the perspective of the competitive advantages that it can obtain from industry factors in which it operates and, therefore, are external to it; and the micro level perspective that bases the company's competitiveness with a focus on its internal resources, tangible and intangible, the resource-based view (RBV) built from Barney (1991).

2. Methods

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is a powerful tool for scientific research (Xiao and Watson, 2019). The literature review protocol guarantees a rigorous, transparent, and repeatable process (Okoli and Sharaban, 2012, Tranfield *et al*., 2003,) and ensures that the advancement of scientific knowledge is adequately supported by existing knowledge. Data analysis combines a bibliometric and a thematic approach (Bahoo *et al*., 2020). Bibliometric analysis is a suitable tool for identifying the most relevant works (Zupic and Cater, 2015) and is vital for analysing relationships and gathering topics from academic articles (Liu, 2017). For bibliometric analysis, one used the VOSViewer v1.6.18 software.

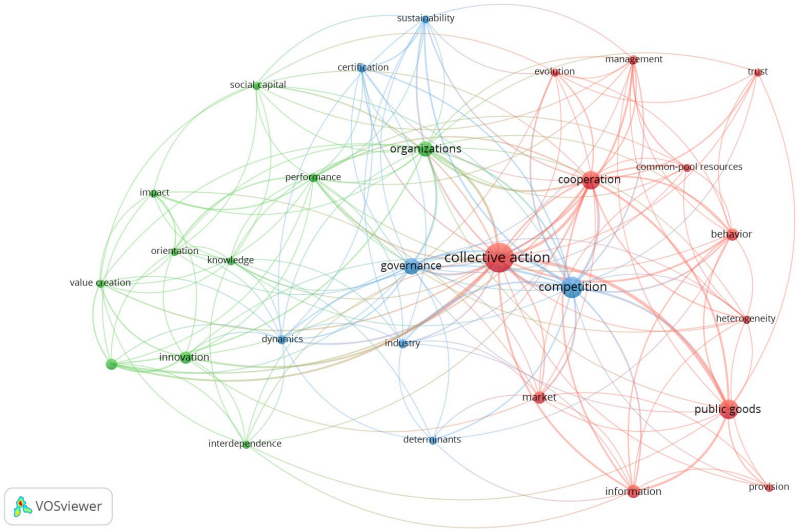
In January 2023, a bibliographical search was carried out in the Web of Science (WoS), a database recommended for systematic literature reviews (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016), as the journals included in this database are carefully and rigorously evaluated, which give them adequate scientific validity (Ankrah and Al-Tabbaa, 2015). The following search terms were used: WoS - All fields: "collective action" and competit*. One obtained 832 documents, which were refined by combining ten keywords from each of the two domains, CA and competitiveness (Zuñiga-Collazos *et al*., 2019). This refinement resulted in 199 articles, which were submitted to inclusion and exclusion criteria. We use several WoS filters as inclusion criteria and we exclude articles unrelated to collective action and competitiveness in a business environment, which resulted in a final sample of 67 articles.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Thematic Relations

To understand the structure of a network of relationships between themes that represent a construct of a given area of research, we can use a bibliometric method (Zupic and Cater, 2015), which is vital to analyse relationships and gather topics from academic articles (Liu, 2017). A co-keyword occurrence analysis was used to construct a conceptual structure of the research domain (Callon *et al*., 1983). In the set of 67 articles, 550 co-keywords were found. Considering the minimum occurrence of 3 times per keyword, it resulted in 29 co-keywords (Figure 1). These three clusters show a network of thematic relationships.

The first (red cluster) encompasses 12 items and has CA as its central theme, highlighting public goods and cooperation issues. Business competitiveness factors constitute the central body of the second cluster (green), encompassing 10 items, with innovation, knowledge, and performance being the most relevant. The themes of governance and competition stand out in the third group, with seven items (blue cluster). The position of this cluster in the network points to the interconnection that governance can establish between CA and business competitiveness.



Source: Own elaboration using the VOSViewer v1.6.18 software

Figure 1: Co-keyword occurrence analysis

According to Zupic and Cater (2015), bibliometric analysis is not a substitute for traditional analyses, so a thematic analysis was also used for all articles under study.

3.2 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the 67 articles led us to define thematic areas and respective categories and subcategories as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories and subcategories by thematic areas

Thematic Areas	**Categories**	**Subcategories**
Collective Action	CA Problems	Barriers Adherence Participation
	CA Strategies	Corporate Political Activity Consortia and Alliances Cooperation
Business Competitiveness	Resources	Social Capital
	Innovation	Quality Differentiation
	Markets	Access Certification
	Performance	Productivity Decision Making
Governance	Coordination	Competition Collaboration
	Regulation	Monitoring Lobbying Self-Regulation

Source: Own elaboration

3.2.1 Collective action

CA problems

The successful management of common-pool resources is one of the most challenging and pressing problems facing natural resource management and environmental economics (Ostrom, 2010). Many obstacles to CA are related to the inadequate use of existing regulations, such as the institutional configuration of the tax regime (Rixen, 2011; Skurray, 2015).

A lack of social capital reduces the ability to act (Kokthi et al., 2021), and a lack of motivation to change a current situation can also result in a CA problem (Monios and Lambert, 2013). The degree of commitment and consequent contribution to common objectives depends on the partners' perceptions regarding the behavior of others (Fonti et al., 2017). Low participation in collective activities can reduce the ability of groups to provide valuable services to their members (de Reuver et al., 2016). However, to ensure long-term success more is needed to rely solely on pre-existing levels of trust and reciprocity between those involved in CA (Ostrom, 2010). Active participation in supply chain management can be achieved by developing organizations capable of managing supply in volume and quality (Dervillé and Allaire, 2014). Formalization sets forth regulations, procedures, and standards within an inter-organizational setting, fostering stability, while also binding both parties to the relationship. Interaction, on the other hand, promotes the exchange of information, coordination, cooperation, and deeper engagement among participants, restricting opportunism.

Opportunism is one of the main problems that emerge in collective actions, as in the case of strategic alliances with partners of different natures and other inter-organizational networks and is decisive in the effectiveness of CA (Fonti et al., 2017). Despite the action problem within them, alliances are often attractive (Konrad, 2018). A collective problem of opportunism is the inability to internalize a positive externality (Cheikbossian, 2021). Opportunism acts as a hindrance, undermining CA in two distinct ways: individuals may either be swayed to act selfishly and opportunistically, or they may become hesitant to cooperate due to the apprehension of others' opportunistic behaviour which leads to the dilemma of initiating CA (de Reuver et al., 2016). Opportunism has also harmful effects on the performance of franchisees in a franchise network, that may be limited by establishing appropriate normative expectations and cultivating strong ties between parties (Kidwell et al., 2007). In advocacy groups, some activists may decide to take the lead, which introduces a CA problem (Reuben et al., 2015).

The tension between the collective interests of the group and the individual interest of each member impacts the dynamics of intergroup cooperation and competition (Coen, 2013). Analysis of the interactions between intra-group CA problems and inter-group conflict shows that inter-group competition promotes intra-group cooperation and that larger groups are more effective in overcoming their CA problems (Cheikbossian, 2012). When forming alliances and faced with a conflict in a framework with incomplete information about the relative strength of the potential ally, participants anticipate the selection of other players and the informative value of their own and others' choices (Konrad and Morath, 2018). In the case of consortium formation, conflict management and strong protection of the competitive advantages of associated companies are also crucial to motivating participants' contributions (Xia et al., 2012). In multifaceted digital platforms characterized by rapid growth, distributed innovation, and role flexibility operating in different geographic locations, it is recommended that business models are designed in a way that allows the creation of joint value from the beginning and avoids the emergence and escalation of conflicts (Ricart et al., 2020). From the above findings, we can derive the first proposition:

(P1): CA problems may lead to less business competitiveness.

CA strategies

Members of interest groups appear to value both the private goods they receive in the form of selective incentives and the lobbying services purchased with their members' money (Pecorino, 2001). The incentives for CA to influence policy are high since the potential benefits are significant and concentrated (Chase, 2004). The multifaceted relationships between collusion, lobbying and group formation, and environmental policy highlight the role of trade liberalization in product market competition and its consequent impact on the incentive to lobby for less stringent environmental policies (Damania and Fredriksson, 2003). An ownership community that embodies consent, jurisdictional competition, and residual claim (incentive alignment) mitigates CA problems (Makovi, 2019).

Cooperation mechanisms established by social capital play a positive role in creating trust in a group of people, which reduces opportunistic behaviour and facilitates the development of collective activities in the form of security mechanisms (Kokthi *et al*., 2021), such as security food, a collective good assumed to be desirable for this entire industry (Pouliot and Sumner, 2013). Solidarity and reciprocity are essential ingredients of social capital and influence the degree of cooperation between local stakeholders, which are necessary preconditions for successful collective actions (Kokthi *et al*., 2021). Reciprocity can also be facilitated if the cooperative intentions of others can be assessed with information gathered through communication and face-to-face interaction (Price, 2006). The level of reciprocal cooperation is a critical element of community resource management, which helps resource users to collaborate (Tembata and Takeuchi, 2018). It is suitable to design relationships that help establish appropriate normative expectations and cultivate strong ties between parties (Kidwell *et al*., 2007).

Participation in consortia benefits companies in two ways: through the final products that companies develop together and through the cooperation process, which includes inter-organizational learning and the construction of social capital (Xia *et al*., 2012). Through networked CA activities, participants identify common interests, share market knowledge, and develop new business opportunities (Devaux *et al*., 2009), which leads to higher incomes for small agricultural producers (Kazangi *et al*., 2009), benefit from the technological, commercial and institutional innovations generated. Creating public-private consortia can be a way to develop new markets (Monios and Lambert, 2013) and participation in alliances improves the ability of partners to access and share some goods produced within alliances without restrictions (Monge *et al*., 1998). Based on the findings of these authors we can derive the second proposition - (P2): CA strategies contribute to solving CA problems.

3.2.2 Business competitiveness

Resources

Social capital is a collective resource and is crucial for those involved in CA to share resources with other members. Among the components of social capital are reciprocity, reputation, information, knowledge, and trust (Enriquez-Sanchez *et al*., 2017). Reciprocity suggests that people cooperate more when they perceive that others are cooperating and less when they perceive that others are opportunistic (Price, 2006) and collective effort is a public good for group members (Cheikbossian, 2021). Reciprocity motives are essential predictors of individual decisions in CA situations (Fisher and Qaim, 2014) and influence participation in collective activities. However, to ensure long-term success more is needed to rely solely on pre-existing levels of trust and reciprocity among those involved in CA (Ostrom, 2010). Reciprocal preferences in groups should provide the voluntary offer of public goods, the size of which is associated with greater levels of trust among group members (Guttman, 2013).

The reputation generated by the satisfaction of users of a technological platform is a collective good, which, when benefiting all participants, takes on the characteristics of a commonly produced good (Cennamo and Santaló, 2019). Traceability protects an industry's reputation from randomly occurring incidents, identifying and isolating the product that caused the problem, and limiting the size of recalls (Pouliot and Sumner, 2013). The information transmitted by the density of relationships provided by the existence of social capital allows for better decision-making and obtaining advantages for those who have access to them, as long as the information is accurate and reliable (Kokthi *et al*., 2021; Laussel *et al*., 2022).

Innovation

The quality and differentiation of food products are critical dimensions for success in modern food markets, and producer-controlled market organizations have the potential to significantly impact the sharing of fixed costs associated with innovation and certification thereby exerting influence over the quality of distributed products in the market and regulating supplies (Saitone and Sexton, 2010). In the complementary innovation process (Maciel and Fisher, 2018), companies exchange critical resources to promote peer entry, growth, and continuous product innovation. National innovation policies interact strategically to enable more effective business environments, fostering global entrepreneurship and innovation (Potts, 2016). However, some established sectors share common characteristics that resist change, particularly disruptive innovation, which impedes the launch of innovations or innovative practices in the market (Jaffee and Freeman, 2002; Weiss and Bonvillian, 2013). CA is essential for innovation in the agricultural and construction sectors and to encourage investment in innovative technologies in the energy sector. Complementary innovation is fostered by

heterogeneous companies belonging to ecosystems based on technological platforms, which promotes the creation of value (Cennamo and Santaló, 2019).

Markets

Conditions for market access are best achieved with the collective organization of producers, which increases levels of social capital to strengthen internal and external relationships (Lutz and Tadesse, 2017). Market infrastructure is fundamental for the CA of collective actors to extract value from their private capabilities, which is why it is crucial for successful market formation (Struben *et al*., 2020).

Performance

Productivity is positively related to engagement in the exchange of strategic information in both the short and long term (Barnes *et al*., 2017) and with improved coordination of inter-group competition (Cheikobossian, 2012). CA, solid leadership, and a focus on technical, organizational, financial, and marketing innovation are essential for improving performance in dynamic markets (Kazangi *et al*., 2009). Government regulation can reinforce corporate profitability by inducing CA to mitigate environmental risks (Pang, 2018) and promoting reforms that improve labour quality, social harmony, and economic security (Karsten, 1995), thus reinforcing productivity.

The context of decision-making is vital for structuring and developing CA through resource allocation and strategy performance (Pittz and Adler, 2016). Using common-pool resources is often a competitive activity and raises essential questions about the costs and benefits of engaging in cooperative behaviours and the socio-structural dynamics that form the basis of decision-making by stakeholders (Barnes *et al*., 2017). Now we can define two other propositions relating to CA strategies and business competitiveness:

(P3): CA strategies have an influence, positive or negative, on business competitiveness.

(P4): The pursuit of business competitiveness factors stimulates CA strategies.

3.2.3 Governance

Coordination

The need for a governance mechanism for CA in ecosystems (Cennamo and Santaló, 2019), and collective institutions are necessary to obtain orderly market behaviour (Harriss-White, 1995). The effectiveness of collaborative collective actions to manage common-pool resources depends on the scale of the issue being assessed (Bowen *et al*., 2018). Collective governance entails the implementation of institutional innovations and investments by resource users thereby aligning interests in resource exploitation with those focused on maintaining stock balance. Collective management or governance is an alternative to, or can complement, centralized and market-based management approaches for common-pool resources, whose sources of inefficiency can be reduced through coordinating efforts and defining rules of using (Costello and Deacon, 2017; Skurray, 2015). In the case of multi-sector partnerships involving several stakeholders, an open strategy governance platform is appropriate (Pittz and Adler, 2016).

To mobilize collective coordination capabilities to face global changes in different regional contexts, market agents need material and immaterial investments and the help of regional public actors to build new local collective capabilities (Dervillé and Allaire, 2014). To encourage CA by companies to reduce polluting emissions (Pang, 2018), it is required cooperation and coordinated CA for the use of resources and the imposition of joint restrictions (Tembata and Takeuchi, 2018). Market-based instruments (MBI) are generally used to promote competition, with individualized approaches to improving ecological values framed around the farm scale (Cooke and Moon, 2015). Initiatives depending on relational governance are inclined to foster collaboration to a greater extent. Non-financial incentives, such as reputational benefits and shared intellectual property rights, are more likely found in projects that rely on relational governance (de Reuver *et al*., 2016).

The coordination of collaborative conduct by business associations and consumer alliances plays a central role in the complementary innovation process, allows the development of a market and increased global competitiveness (Maciel and Fischer, 2018).

Regulation

Implementing and enforcing institutional rules are responsible for success, and comparing successes and failures can help understand what works and what does not to support CA (Buhren and Dannenberg, 2021).

Institutions affect social processes and the system's outcomes vary depending on the agency's reactions to output and voice (Shin, 2022). The polycentric approach (Ostrom, 2014), overseen by engaged local, regional, and national stakeholders, offers a significant advantage over a single governmental unit to solve global CA problems. Regulation based on market instruments can limit the incentive to share information about common-pool resources (Costello and Deacon, 2007), while at the same time, it can generate tension between the focus on property and political environmental management leading to insufficient conservation of public goods (Cooke and Moon, 2015). The quality of environmental public goods, such as air quality and drinking water, or quasi-public goods such as health care varies with the number of local governments and the relationships between different jurisdictions (Hatfield and Kosec, 2019, Karsten, 1995).

Monitoring is an essential factor in the success of CA by reducing opportunistic behaviours, which can also be achieved through government imposition of mandatory participation (Saitone and Sexton, 2010). Increased monitoring opportunities and a formal or informal penalty system may deter opportunism (Price, 2006). The imposition of food safety standards or a traceability system on the industry can be carried out through self-regulation or government regulation (Pouliot and Sumner, 2013), but the existence of a great number of voluntary standards organizations may constitute a problem (Reinecke *et al*., 2012).

Sectors characterized by a greater degree of competition and low concentration levels tend to exert pressure jointly, that is, through sectoral business associations. In contrast, individual lobbying predominates in sectors with greater concentration and more differentiated products (Bombardini and Trebbi, 2012). The process of competition and CA that leads to change reveals a complex picture that highlights the contradictory motives of organizational actors who fight for and against institutional change (Jaffee and Freeman, 2002). Competition can trigger the need for institutional change, but it can also prevent it from happening when the change threatens organizations' current distribution of resources. Pressure from political entities representing producing companies hindered by the constraints of national market sizes often leads to the emergence of protectionist measures and the formation of trading blocs.

Self-regulation may not prevent market manipulation, so the roles of law, regulation, and self-regulation in deterring manipulation depend on the costs and benefits of available alternatives (Pirrong, 1995). The industry's coordinated response to a CA problem, associated with the need for moderation in price increases, proves to be preferable to government intervention (Ellison and Wolfram, 2006). However, sometimes the intervention of state institutions is necessary to resolve common problems (Kokthi *et al.*, 2021).

The rules of the collective organization determine the type of relationship that is established between the members of a sector (Bowen *et al*., 2018) and the definition of norms and codes of conduct by the organizations coordinating CA constitutes a mechanism for managing the tensions and conflicts generated by the opportunistic behaviour of members (Maciel and Fischer, 2020). We can define two other propositions about the role of governance:

(P5): Governance mechanisms moderate the relationship between CA problems and business competitiveness.

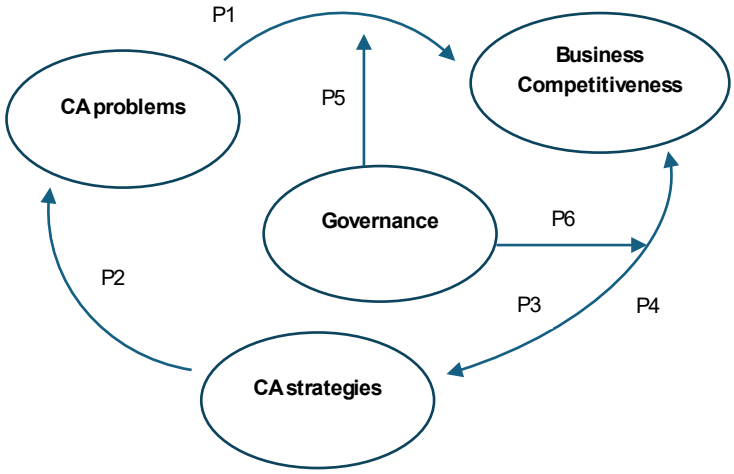
(P6): Governance mechanisms moderate the relationship between CA strategies and business competitiveness.

This thematic analysis and the propositions derived from it led us to propose a conceptual model that presents the relationships between the primary variables.

4. Conceptual Model

The existence and production of collective goods are essential conditions for the economic development of society. The very nature of these goods leads to companies needing to get involved in collective actions in which actors of other types also participate. CA produces a set of collective goods valuable for business competitiveness. However, it also gives rise to problems whose nature and resolution require developing CA strategies. The main problems of CA can occur at different stages: in formation, structuring, adherence and participation in collective actions; the dynamics and context in which CA unfolds, as well as the characteristics of markets, also influence CA problems. The number and size of participants in the CA are equally relevant to the outcome of that action. Opportunism, particularly in situations involving common-pool resources, is one of the main problems that emerge in collective action, generating tensions and conflicts between participants. There is a very close relationship between business competitiveness and CA strategies. Solving CA problems involves defining and implementing CA strategies.

Governance can play a relevant role in ensuring the success of collective actions in different areas of socioeconomic activity and is essential for strategies to have an impact. The social capital generated by governance is a fundamental antecedent for the dynamization and existence of CA and the production of collective goods. Regulation and self-regulation emerge as two relevant governance mechanisms to guarantee this success, which is also strongly linked to the type of coordination exercised. Governance mechanisms, therefore, contain CA strategies and must contribute to resolving CA problems and fostering business competitiveness.



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2: Conceptual Model for Collective Action and Business Competitiveness

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between CA and business competitiveness based on a systematic literature review that combined bibliometric and thematic analysis, leading to the development of six propositions within a conceptual model. These propositions address both the endogenous and exogenous interaction between CA problems and strategies and business competitiveness. The paper also highlights the role that governance is likely to play in moderating these relationships, whether as a coordinating agent or as an actor in regulation and self-regulation.

This investigation has some limitations, related to the sole use of the WoS database to select articles for analysis within business, economics, and management. CA and its relationship with business competitiveness present a vast field for further investigation. It is possible to expand the study with contributions from other scientific fields, as could be the case with Sociology. More theorical and empirical studies carried out with business associations will be able to shed light on the governance of CA and its impact on business competitiveness. Defining a systemic model that relates CA to business competitiveness makes sense, considering antecedent, process, and consequent variables.

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