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The Impact of Competition Intensity and Strategic Capabilities on Competitive Strategic Business Choices: The Case of Tunisian Manufacturing Industries

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to show that competitive strategies can be traced back to both internal and external factors. In a sample of Tunisian companies, the concentration strategy, which is independent of marketing and market linkage capacities, is the most solicited faced to the competitive intensity. Cost dominance, which depends on managerial capacities, occupies the second position. Finally, differentiation is the least sought, but dependent on technological's and information technology's capabilities.

Keywords: Intensity of Competition, Strategic Capabilities, Competitive Strategic Choices, Cost Dominance, Differentiation, Concentration
JEL Classifications: L6, M1

1. INTRODUCTION

The question that this paper proposes to address is whether competitive strategies can be explained by both internal and external factors. Indeed, it is almost ridiculous to just explain strategic choices today by exclusively internal factors or exclusively external factors. The combination of these two types of factors seems to become an imperative for success and the key word of the recent strategic literature.

The latter highlights two main types of factors that may explain the recourse of competitive strategies. The SWOT model is a first illustration of the combination of these two external and internal factors. However, the models and approaches that followed oscillate between these two factors together without bringing them together (Porter, 1980; Ortega et al., 2009; Acquaah et al., 2008; Parnell, 2011; Batista et al., 2016). Few works have assembled it in an integrative and combined analysis to explain competitive strategic choices. As such, we mention the work of Spanos and Lioukas (2001); Galbreath and Galvin (2008). In addition, the works still controversial as to the best competitive strategy to adopt towards an increasingly competitive environment and internal organizational factors or resources held.

In this research, we focus our interest on the intensity of competition and strategic capabilities as explanatory factors respectively external and internal competitive strategic choices.

This article aims, then, to contribute to this debate and to study the comparative explanatory factors (internal and external) of the different competitive strategies in the Tunisian manufacturing industry. The question then will be:

> Faced to the Intensification of Competition, and Given the Nature of their Strategic Capabilities, What Kind of Competitive Strategies Should Companies Prioritize?

In order to provide some answers to these questions, certain hypotheses have been proposed and tested on a sample of Tunisian industrial enterprises. The results suggest that the intensity of competition pushes the favored adoption of concentration strategies. With respect to strategic capabilities, the results of the empirical study found that competitive strategic choices depend on the nature of the strategic capabilities held.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The Determinants of Strategic Choices

2.1.1. Competitive forces approach

The literature on competition shows the existence of two major approaches: the structural approach and the behavioral approach (Le Roy, 2004). Contrary to the behavioral approach that refers the intensity of competition to the conscious actions of firms, the structuralist approach claims that the intensity of competition depends on structural factors (Le Roy, 2004), where firms have other concern than to adapt to the demands of the environment (demand and technology). According to Le Roy (2001), the latter has been extended in management sciences to give rise to two approaches: A direct approach (Porter, 1982) and an indirect approach that supports the idea that the strategic decision can be explained by adaptability to the environment (Ansoff and McDonnell, 1990).

This research is based on the "five forces of competition" approach of Porter (1980), which itself comes from the industrial economy (SCP), to propose a first structural explanation (direct) of strategic choices. In his attempt to explain competitive strategies, Porter (1980) was the first to conceive the concept of "force." For him (1980), the intensity of competition within a sector of activity widens to depend on the state of the five structural forces, namely existing competition, potential competition, indirect competition, customers and suppliers. Porter states on this point that (1980. p. 3) "the structure of a sector has a strong influence on the determination of the competitive rules of the game and on the strategies to which the firm has the possibility to resort."

According to Galbreath and Galvin (2008), Porter's "competitive forces approach" provides companies with a comprehensive framework enriched by analytical techniques for analyzing the industry and its evolution, understanding competitors and their positioning compared to these competitors while translating this understanding into a competitive strategy that supports its position in the market. However, this approach has been fully criticized for its exclusive focus on external factors explaining strategic choices. In fact, unlike Porter's confirmations, at the level of the same sector, companies do not achieve the same levels of performance by adopting the same strategy. Hence the emergence of the resource approach.

2.1.2. The resource based view

This approach dates back to the works of Penrose (1959) and the Harvard School. However, it has only been fully institutionalized with the works of Wernerfelt (1984) who, while drawing on the SWOT model, refers resources to the strengths and weaknesses of a company. Nevertheless, it was not until Barney's (1991) work to consider resources as sources of sustainable and durable competitive advantage. The resource approach thus conceives the firm as a collection of unique resources that can influence its evolution and strategic choices, as well as its competitive advantage and rents. Resources are defined by Barney (1991) as: "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, attributes of the firm, information, knowledge, etc." controlled by a firm that allows it to design and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness." This definition, which seems to us the most complete, integrates the company's capabilities in the field of resources. Indeed, most founding research does not make the explicit distinction between the term "resources" and "capabilities." Amit and Schoemaker (1993), while grouping the company at a "bundle of resources," consider that the latter correspond to the assets it owns and controls, while the capacities correspond to their assets. Ability to exploit and combine these resources through organizational routines to complete one's journey. These capabilities are based on specific, tangible and intangible information processes that develop through complex interactions between resources. These capabilities can only be described as strategic when they enable firms to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, increase production efficiency, improve deliveries, and thereby increase competitiveness (Day, 1994; Spanos and Lioukas, 2001; Desarbo et al., 2005). A quick overview of the literature reveals a wide range of strategic capabilities. In this work, we focus on certain types of strategic capabilities commonly used in the literature, including: managerial, technological, marketing, market linkage and information technology capabilities.

2.1.3. Complementarily of the porterian approach and the approach by the resources

It is widely accepted that these two approaches present differences in explanation of strategic choices and competitive advantage, but also similarities, resulting in their complementarily (Amit and Shomaker, 1993). According to Spanos and Lioukas (2001), the RBV shares with Porter's approach the idea that above-average returns are possible, thus encouraging the acquisition of an attractive strategic position (Conner, 1991). In return, these two approaches reveal a fundamental difference. Indeed, the first links strategic choices to exogenous factors, while the second relates them to intrinsic factors. According to Wernerfelt (1984), these two approaches constitute two sides of the same coin. Indeed, in line with Barney and Griffin's (1992) insights, value creation stems logically from internal capabilities to strategy and from strategy to the competitive environment (Spanos and Lioukas, 2001). These ideas were also defended by Barney and Zajac (1994), Barney et al. (1994), Amit and Schomaker (1993) and Penrose (1959) who explained that the examination of the skills needed to implement strategy must not be done independently of the firm's competitive environment analysis and vice versa (Spanos and Lioukas, 2001). This idea also coincides with the SWOT model, where resources correspond to "strengths and weaknesses" while the analysis of the competitive environment corresponds to "opportunities and threats." Covering different aspects and areas of application, these two approaches seem to be complementary in the context of the SWOT analysis (Barney, 1991).

2.2. Competitive Strategic Choices

The term "competitive strategy," which was peddled by Porter (1982), has been extensively studied in the empirical and theoretical literature of strategic management, including the works of Dess and Davis (1984); Miller (1988) (Duquesnois et al., 2010). According to Porter (1982), two factors can guide competitive strategic choices respectively according to their nature and intensity. This is the competitive advantage and the field of competition. Indeed, the competitive advantage may vary between cost and differentiation, while the scope of competition may cover the entire market or be limited to one or more segments of the market. Three basic strategies called "generic" can, consequently, emerge. It is the strategy of domination by costs, differentiation and concentration. In this respect, Porter (1982) adds that a company has interest in choosing only one generic strategy to obtain a strong position relative to the competition. Otherwise, it risks becoming bogged down in a middle path that places it in a permanent position of limited profitability (Dess and Davis, 1984; Porter, 1980).

3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the Porterian and RBV approach presented above, we propose a composite model explaining the choice of competitive strategies based on the intensity of competition and strategic capabilities (Figure 1).

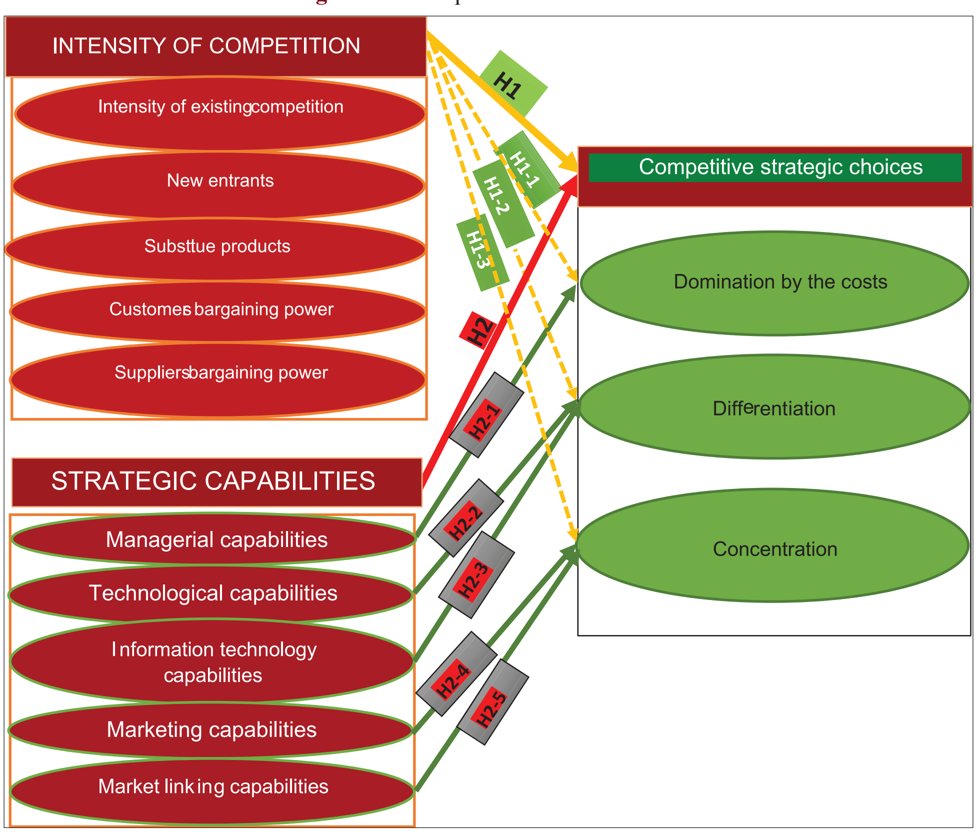
3.1. The Impact of the Intensity of Competitive Forces on Competitive Strategic Choices

The empirical study of Tavitiyaman et al. (2011) among 317 hotel companies show that the weak bargaining power of clients and the low threat of new entrants favor strong competitive strategies, while existing competition does not show a significant effect on these competitive strategies. According to these authors, when companies understand the effect of each force in the industry, they can take either defensive strategies or offensive strategies in order to place themselves in an appropriate position against the pressure exerted by these industry forces (Ormanidhi and Stringa, 2008 cited by Tavitiyaman et al., 2011). According to these authors, for hotel companies, the threats of substitutes, and the bargaining power of suppliers, do not have a significant effect on competitive strategies because of the large number of suppliers in this sector and the fact that hotels offer similar or mass products and services (Dale, 2000; Kim and Oh, 2004; Olsen and Roper, 1998 cited by Tavitiyaman et al., 2011).

To further substantiate our argument, we cite Hambrick's (1983) empirical study that argues that the low-cost strategy is difficult to implement in dynamic environments. Miller (1988) has also shown that the cost dominating strategy is inversely related to the uncertainty of the environment, especially for successful firms. Walker et al. (2003) also show that "defendant" strategies are adopted, among other things, when the number of competitors is high and the concentration is low. From a close perspective, Desarboo et al. (2005) show that companies pursuing a defender strategy are those that face the greatest level of uncertainty in the competitive, marketing and technological environment.

Concerning differentiation, Ward and Duray (2000) find a positive and significant relationship between the environment in general and the differentiation strategy. In the context of deregulation, some

Figure 1: Conceptual model of research



authors, of which we quote Delmas et al. (2007) have empirically confirmed in the electrical industry that this context drives companies to choose differentiation. As for Crook et al. (2003), they show that in order to cope with customers' bargaining power, mainly due to their size, concentration and large volume of purchase, companies opt for the differentiation of their product and service offerings. In this same perspective, Enz (2010) shows that in the face of the existing rivalry, companies are moving towards the differentiation of their products. Desarboo et al. (2005) find that the prospecting companies operate in the context of an uncertainty of the relatively low competitive, marketing and technological environment.

In terms of concentration strategies, Smith and Grimm (1987) have shown, on a sample of companies in the US rail industry, that in highly competitive environments firms tend to adopt concentration strategies to maintain their competitiveness.

Walker et al. (2003) show that the "analyzer" strategies are pursued when the conditions of the "prospector" and "defender" strategies are mixed, which refer, inter alia, to the product life cycle phase, to the number of competitors and the degree of concentration.

With reference to the previous developments, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The intensity of competitive forces promotes competitive strategic choices.

From this hypothesis derive the following sub-hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1-1: The intensity of competitive forces favors competitive strategic choices of cost dominance.

Hypothesis 1-2: The intensity of competitive forces favor competitive strategic choices of differentiation.

Hypothesis 1-3: The intensity of competitive forces favor competitive strategic choices of concentration.

3.2. The Impact of Strategic Capabilities on Competitive Strategic Choices

The impact of resources on competitive strategies has been empirically proven by many authors including Spanos and Likouas (2001) who have shown that the availability of the stock of specific resources (managerial capabilities, marketing capabilities and technical capabilities) is necessary for company for the development of its competitive strategy and for the achievement of a competitive advantage. By digging into the analysis, Parnell (2011) has proven that some capabilities may be more important to support a specific type of competitive strategy.

With reference to these developments, we make the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The nature of the strategic capabilities held determines the nature of the competitive strategies adopted.

By focusing on the cost leadership strategy, Parnell (2011) argues that the latter will be more related to managerial capacities, necessary to ensure cost control and efficiency of production. This author confirms, in an empirical study conducted in Argentina, Peru and the United States, the positive effect of managerial capacities on cost dominating strategies. For their part, Batista et al. (2016) find, in an empirical study conducted on firms in the textile sector in Brazil, that managerial capacities have a positive and significant impact on cost strategies.

As regards the effect of technological capabilities, Ortega (2010) shows that these capacities constitute favorable determinants of differentiation. However, Batista et al. (2016) do not prove this impact. Desarboo et al. (2005) also show that firms with information technology capabilities correspond to "prospector" firms that are able to differentiate their offer and innovate.

In terms of the effect of marketing capabilities on niche strategies, Batista et al. (2016) prove that there is a significant relationship between marketing capabilities and focus strategies. Parnell (2011) shows that a niche strategy requires specific attributes related to marketing capabilities in order to focus efforts on a particular niche market.

Finally, for market linking capabilities, Parnell (2011) proves that market-link capabilities favor the adoption of niche strategies. Collis and Montgomery (2008) also show that the capabilities in the field of market connection serve as prerequisites for the niche strategy.

Thus, with reference to these authors, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2-1: Managerial capabilities promote cost dominance strategies.

Hypothesis 2-2: Technological capabilities promote differentiation strategies.

Hypothesis 2-3: Information technology capabilities promote differentiation strategies.

Hypothesis 2-4: Marketing capabilities promote concentration strategies.

Hypothesis 2-5: Market linking capabilities promote concentration strategies.

4. RESULTS

The results obtained from survey (Box 1) are summarized in the following. The impact of the intensity of competition on competitive strategies has been positive and significant, confirming H1. Similarly, the competitive intensity shows a positive and significant effect on the strategy of cost dominance, differentiation and concentration, hence the confirmation of H1-1, H1-2 and H1-3.

Regarding the second explanatory variable of our model, the empirical study has demonstrated the positive and significant effect of certain strategic capabilities on different competitive strategies. Hence the confirmation of H2. More specifically, the managerial capacities reveal a positive and significant effect on the strategy of domination by the costs, hence the confirmation of H2-1. Technological and information technology capabilities show a positive and significant effect on differentiation. What has just supported H2-2 and H2-3. Finally, we found, and surprisingly, the absence of the effect of marketing and market linking abilities on concentration, resulting in the release of H 2-4 and H2-5.

Box 1: Research methodology

We adopt a quantitative hypothetico-deductive approach (questionnaire-based survey). The mother population consists of companies operating in the Tunisian manufacturing industry (the textile and clothing, electrical, electronics and household appliances, chemical, food industry sectors). The sampling method chosen is that of reasoned choice.

"Existing competition" is measured by the Mia and Clark (1999) scale adapted by Al-Rfou (2012). The other competitive forces are measured by Weerawardena scales (2006). The different strategic capabilities are measured by the scales of Desarboo et al. (2005). The domination by the costs, is measured by the scale of Le Roy (2001; 2003). Differentiation (a single global dimension) and concentration are measured by the Zahra and Covin's (1993) scales adapted by Parnell (2011). For all items on the chosen scales of measurement, respondents are asked to rate, on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "very low" to 7 "very high" their attitudes towards the different variables of the 'study.

We checked the validity of content (the appreciation of peers and experts, pre-testing with 12 companies). Then we administered the questionnaire (face-to-face), in its final version, to the directors of companies. 400 copies were distributed, but only 236 were returned with a return rate of 59%. Of these 236 copies, only 203 were exploitable with 85.5% exploitable responses. Then, we checked the reliability and the dimensionality of the scales of measurement. Finally, the use of the structural equation method revealed a good quality of fit of the global model.

5. DISCUSSION

The global model test allowed us to assert that competitive intensity has a positive and significant effect on different competitive strategies. In other words, competitive intensity seems to be a favorable factor for the pursuit of all competitive strategies, but, concentration strategies are the most preferred, come later cost leadership strategies, and, in last resort, differentiation strategies.

The primacy of concentration strategies makes the assumption that companies prefer to focus their efforts and resources on particular niches in order to attract and retain the chosen target, which beyond that, become unsuited to satisfy. This result is in accordance with Duquesnois et al. (2010) who found, in their empirical study of 160 companies in the wine industry in Languedoc-Roussillon, that most companies confirming the increase in competitive pressure, and which are of medium size, adopt niche strategies.. However, our result differs from that of Miller (1988), which proves that the heterogeneity of the environment has no significant effect on the focus strategy.

The pursuit of cost leadership strategies in a highly competitive environment suggests that this competitive weapon remains effective in markets that are price-sensitive or that firms have economies of scale and effects of experience that allow them to produce at a lower cost. This result seems to be close to that of Delmas et al. (2007) in the deregulated power industry sector, marked by strong competitive pressures, which find that successful firms tend to choose cost leadership strategies. We also join Desarboo et al. (2005), which show that companies adopting a defender strategy are those that face the greatest level of uncertainty in the competitive, marketing and technological environment. However, this result diverges relatively from Hall (1981), which shows that firms are increasingly adopting cost strategies in declining sectors marked by weak competitive pressures.

Finally, the pursuit, despite less intense, of differentiation strategies in the face of the intensification of competition dates back to the fact that the companies in our sample are, to a large extent, exporters and the Tunisian market is largely decomposed by foreigner's companies installed in Tunisia. This has the effect of igniting the competitive game and the challenges facing a well-open clientele to a multitude of differentiated offers whether in terms of quality, product innovation, processes, or marketing. This result is consistent with Rangel et al. (2010) who traced further product differentiation in the apparel industry to consumer preferences and the wide variety of customer segments associated with age, gender and income level. However, our results contrast with Tan and Litschert (1994), who have proved in the Chinese electronics industry, that the complexity, dynamism and hostility of the environment have a negative effect on proactive strategic choices.

As for the effect of the firm's strategic capabilities on competitive strategies, the overall model test allowed us to obtain the following results. In the preamble, it turned out that managerial capacities play a very important role in the orientation towards strategies of domination by costs. Indeed, achieving the efficiency and effectiveness that sometimes requires vertical integration makes management tasks more complex and requires improved management skills (Loyola [1974] and Durand [1985], Leite et al. [2014] cited by Batista et al., 2016). This result is consistent with that of Parnell (2011) and Batista et al. (2016) who perceive that managerial capacities favor Cost strategies. However, this finding differs from that of Chandler and Hanks (1994) who found that at 155 companies in northwestern Pennsylvania, resources and cost capabilities do not have a significant effect on cost strategies.

Secondly, the results of the empirical study suggest that technological and information technology capabilities strongly favor the adoption of differentiation strategies. This result seems logical in so far as the differentiation (in terms of quality or design) from competitors is necessarily based on new technologies and especially on NICTs that facilitate communication and allow these companies to be on standby, anticipate changes and react in real time. This result corroborates that of Chandler and Hanks (1994) who find that quality and innovation resources and capabilities support competitive differentiation strategies through innovation and quality. This result is also similar to that of Ortega (2010), based on a sample of 253 companies belonging to the information and communications technology industry in Spain, which found a positive and significant correlation between technological capabilities and differentiation strategies. We also join the results of Desarboo et al. (2005), which show that companies with strong information technology capabilities correspond to “prospector” firms. However, our results diverge from those of Batista et al. (2016) that do not prove the impact of technological capabilities on the differentiation strategy. These authors justify the origin of differentiation of the companies in their sample by the acquisition of equipment incorporating technology and not by the research and development effort within these companies (Rangel et al., 2010). They explain this result, which differs from the results of research dealing with this issue, by the characteristics of the sector studied.

Finally, and contrary to our intuitions, our empirical study has negated the impact of marketing and market linkage abilities on concentration strategies. This result may suggest that the pursuit of concentration strategies is well-founded on other types of strategic capabilities and not dependent on these latter. This goes against the results of Batista et al. (2016), which prove that there is a significant relationship between marketing capabilities and niche focus strategies in the Textile sector in Brazil. According to these authors, the wide variety of consumer preferences and customer segments (age, gender, income level) in the clothing industry is a favorable field for consumer segmentation practices and thus promotes of concentration based on differentiation. Our result is also divergent from that of Parnell (2011), who argues that a niche strategy requires specific attributes related to marketing capabilities to focus efforts on a particular market niche. Our result also seems to contrast with that of Collis and Montgomery (2008), who show that market linkage capabilities serve as necessary precursors to the niche strategy.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The first implication of this research is reflected in the presentation of a diagnostic guide to Tunisian managers, based on the composite reading of the conditions of competition and the portfolio of possessed resources, which must move away from a separative vision and rather orient towards an integrative vision when defining their strategic choices (Spanos and Lioukas, 2001; Galbreath and Galvin, 2008).

The second implication refers to the correlation between the nature of the resources owned and the nature of the competitive strategy adopted. Indeed, certain capacities favor the exclusive adoption of certain particular strategies. Hence, managers have an interest in evaluating their capacity portfolio and developing those that will be in line with the desired strategy. Again, the failure of some strategies can be corrected taking into account the nature of the required strategic capabilities.

More specifically, managers are required to develop technological capabilities and information technology to succeed in their differentiation strategies. Similarly, the implementation of a cost leadership strategy is dependent on the possession and development of managerial capabilities. However, the lack of effect of marketing capabilities and market linking capabilities on the concentration strategy can send an important message to Tunisian manufacturers that reassures them if their companies are indigent about these types of capabilities. This indigence is far from being a handicap to the pursuit of a niche strategy.

These results deliver another important message to companies in the industry who must distinguish between the real threats of competitors (rich in capabilities) versus fictitious ones (poor in capabilities).

Finally, the present results can also be of great utility for public decision-makers aiming to ensure the development and success of Tunisian manufacturing industries and who are responsible for the smooth running of competition and the welfare of the consumer. Indeed, the excessive recourse to aggressive competitive strategies (price wars), which may destroy small businesses, can lead to the self-destruction of competition and harm the smooth running of business.

7. CONCLUSION

This research has led to study the impact of competitive intensity and strategic capabilities on competitive strategies. We have been able to identify in the Tunisian manufacturing industry the best possible competitive strategy faced to the intense competition and the nature of the strategic capabilities held.

The main results of our research revolve around the following statements. At first glance, this work contributes to the enrichment of the debate on the determining factors of competitive strategic choices, which has long been limited to external or internal factors. Through this research, we have succeeded in showing that these two factors contribute concomitantly to the explanation of competitive strategic choices. If the external environment dictates certain strategic choices, it is the strategic capabilities held that draw the field of strategic possibilities.

Similarly, this study provides insights into the heterogeneity of the competitive strategic choices of companies operating in the same industrial sector, shedding light on the stock of strategic capabilities held. Indeed, we have been able to demonstrate that the appropriate strategy is dependent on the nature of the strategic capabilities possessed.

However, this work has certain limitations. The first touches on the question of the impossibility of generalizing the study’s results to other sectors or to other developing countries. This calls for inter-industry benchmarking or comparison with other developing countries to broaden the scope of our results.

In addition, studying a wider range of resources and capabilities owned by the company can enrich our results. Again, the static nature of the resource approach is a major limitation of this work. Indeed, it is rather the ability to integrate, build and reconfigure resources that matters in an environment characterized by rapid changes and not their possession. Only these so-called dynamic capabilities will have the power to create and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage and difficult to imitate. The study of the effect of these dynamic capacities on the competitive strategic choices could possibly enrich the explanatory power of the model.

Finally, the present work is part of a structuralist approach to competition and is limited to the study of the effect of structural factors, dictating the intensity of competition, on strategic choices. Consideration of behavioral factors, such as the characteristics of the company's actions and the reactions of competitors, could call into question our apprehension of competitive intensity (Le Roy, 2004). Future research could see our problem from the point of view of this new approach.

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