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Opportunities of globalization for small and medium industrial enterprises: a systematic review

Oportunidades de la globalización para las pequeñas y medianas empresas del sector industrial: revisión sistemática

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Abstract

In the Latin American context, small and medium-sized industrial enterprises (SMEs) represent a strategic axis for economic development, job creation, and productive innovation. However, their competitiveness is conditioned by the multidimensional effects of globalization, which presents both opportunities and challenges in terms of internationalization, digital transformation, and regulatory adaptation. The central issue lies in understanding how these global processes affect the performance of SMEs, considering their internal capacities, such as leadership, management, and innovation, and the structural conditions of the institutional and regulatory environment. The rationale for the study is based on the need to identify the factors that limit or enhance the integration of SMEs into global markets, especially in contexts marked by financing gaps, weak institutional coordination, and low technology adoption. This understanding is key to guiding public policies, business strategies, and cooperation frameworks that strengthen their sustainability without losing local relevance. The overall objective of the research was to analyze, from a comparative and multidimensional perspective, the factors that affect the competitiveness of Latin American SMEs in the face of globalization processes. To this end, a systematic qualitative and descriptive review of 40 studies was conducted, selected using thematic, regional, and methodological inclusion criteria. The findings were systematized in a thematic frequency table and a PRISMA diagram, revealing recurring patterns such as digital transformation, resilient leadership, university-business-government coordination, and inclusion in international treaties.

Keywords: Globalization, SMEs, Latin America

Resumen

En el contexto latinoamericano, las pequeñas y medianas empresas (PYMEs) industriales representan un eje estratégico para el desarrollo económico, la generación de empleo y la innovación productiva. Sin embargo, su competitividad se ve condicionada por los efectos multidimensionales de la globalización, que plantea tanto oportunidades como desafíos en términos de internacionalización, transformación digital y adaptación normativa. La problemática central radica en comprender cómo inciden estos procesos globales en el desempeño de las

PYMEs, considerando sus capacidades internas, como liderazgo, gestión e innovación, y las condiciones estructurales del entorno institucional y normativo. La justificación del estudio se sustenta en la necesidad de identificar los factores que limitan o potencian la inserción de las PYMEs en mercados globales, especialmente en contextos marcados por brechas de financiamiento, débil articulación institucional y escasa adopción tecnológica. Esta comprensión resulta clave para orientar políticas públicas, estrategias empresariales y marcos de cooperación que fortalezcan su sostenibilidad sin perder pertinencia local. El objetivo general de la investigación fue analizar, desde una perspectiva comparativa y multidimensional, los factores que inciden en la competitividad de las PYMEs latinoamericanas frente a los procesos de globalización. Para ello, se realizó una revisión sistemática cualitativa y descriptiva de 40 estudios seleccionados mediante criterios de inclusión temáticos, regionales y metodológicos. Los hallazgos se sistematizaron en una tabla de frecuencia temática y un diagrama PRISMA, evidenciando patrones recurrentes como la transformación digital, el liderazgo resiliente, la articulación entre universidad–empresa–Estado y la inclusión en tratados internacionales.

Palabras clave: Globalización, PYMEs, Latinoamérica

Introduction

In the Latin American context, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute an essential component of economic development, job creation, and productive innovation (Rodríguez, 2021; Ruiz, 2021; Aguirre et al., 2021; Bonialian, 2021; Marichal, 2024). Their strategic role has gained further visibility in scenarios of global transformation, where internationalization, digitalization, and organizational resilience are identified as key factors for their sustainability (Mendoza, 2024; Chuya et al., 2021; Hurtado et al., 2021; Ludeña, 2024; Costa et al., 2024). Within this framework, globalization has posed both opportunities and challenges for SMEs, compelling them to adapt to complex regulatory environments, highly competitive markets, and increasing technological demands (Levy Orlik, 2023; Cuevas & Ruiz, 2023; Muibo et al., 2022; Dussel, 2022; Tatunts, 2021; López, 2020).

The reason for this study stems from the need to understand how global dynamics impact the performance of SMEs in Latin America, particularly in contexts where funding gaps, weak institutional linkages, and limited technology adoption jeopardize their sustainability (Aguirre and Mori, 2025; Scotti & García, 2023; Martínez & Romo, 2024; Bonialian, 2021; Tatunts, 2021). This understanding is crucial for informing public policies, business strategies, and cooperative frameworks that strengthen their integration into global markets without compromising their local relevance (Vite, 2023; Freire, 2024; Morin & Langle, 2024; Cifuentes & González, 2023).

This study aims to analyze, from a comparative and multidimensional perspective, the factors influencing the competitiveness of Latin American SMEs in light of globalization, considering both their internal capabilities and the structural conditions of the institutional and regulatory environment (Gabino et al., 2025; Gil & Cárdenas, 2022; Pineda, 2021; Morin & Langle, 2024). The systematic review facilitates the identification of recurrent thematic patterns related to business management, innovation, organizational leadership, and the university–business–state interface, elements that shape the competitive ecosystem of SMEs in the region (Villegas, 2022; Mora, 2022; Veiga, 2021; Cifuentes & González, 2023; Costa et al., 2024).

From this exposition, a growing concern emerges regarding the factors that limit the competitiveness of SMEs in Latin America in the face of globalization. Issues such as the lack of business training (Aguirre and Mori, 2025), restricted access to financing (Scotti & García, 2023; Gabino et al., 2025), weak institutional articulation (Gil & Cárdenas, 2022; Mora, 2022), and regulatory tensions (Muibo et al., 2022; Cuevas & Ruiz, 2023) frequently arise, demonstrating the necessity of a multidimensional approach that considers both the internal capabilities of firms and the structural conditions of the regional environment. In this context, the general research question is: How do globalization processes affect the competitiveness of Latin American SMEs, taking into account their internal capabilities and the structural conditions of the institutional and regulatory environment?

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive approach, employing systematic review as the primary analytical tool. A total of 40 studies addressing the relationship between Latin American SMEs and globalization were selected, based on criteria of thematic relevance, regional focus, and disciplinary diversity.

The research relied on a descriptive systematic review, utilizing scientific articles as primary sources of information. The chosen variable or object of study was globalization, understood as a multidimensional phenomenon impacting industrial SMEs in Latin America. The systematic review was conducted across the databases of Web of Science, ProQuest, SciELO, Dialnet, and Scopus. The selection of articles was governed by four criteria: 1) studies that included the terms “globalization,” “SMEs,” or “Latin American industry” in the title,

abstract, or keywords; 2) research whose subjects of analysis were SMEs from Latin American countries; 3) studies that corresponded geographically and thematically to Latin America; and 4) articles published between 2020 and September 2025.

Following the selection of studies, an analytical reading was conducted to extract relevant contributions and proposals. These were organized into a thematic frequency table, which facilitated the identification of the most recurrent topics: strengthening internal capabilities, access to financing, institutional articulation, organizational leadership, digital transformation, strategic internationalization, among others. This systematization relied on content analysis of the articles, taking into account both their objectives and conclusions.

Approximately 40 articles related to the effects of globalization on Latin American industrial SMEs were obtained. Subsequently, an individual reading of each text was performed to verify the presence of the terms "globalization," "SMEs," or "Latin American industry" in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. Through this technique, three articles were excluded for not including these terms in the relevant sections, nor focusing on the Latin American context. Next, articles not published in high-impact journals were identified and similarly excluded, resulting in the elimination of three studies.

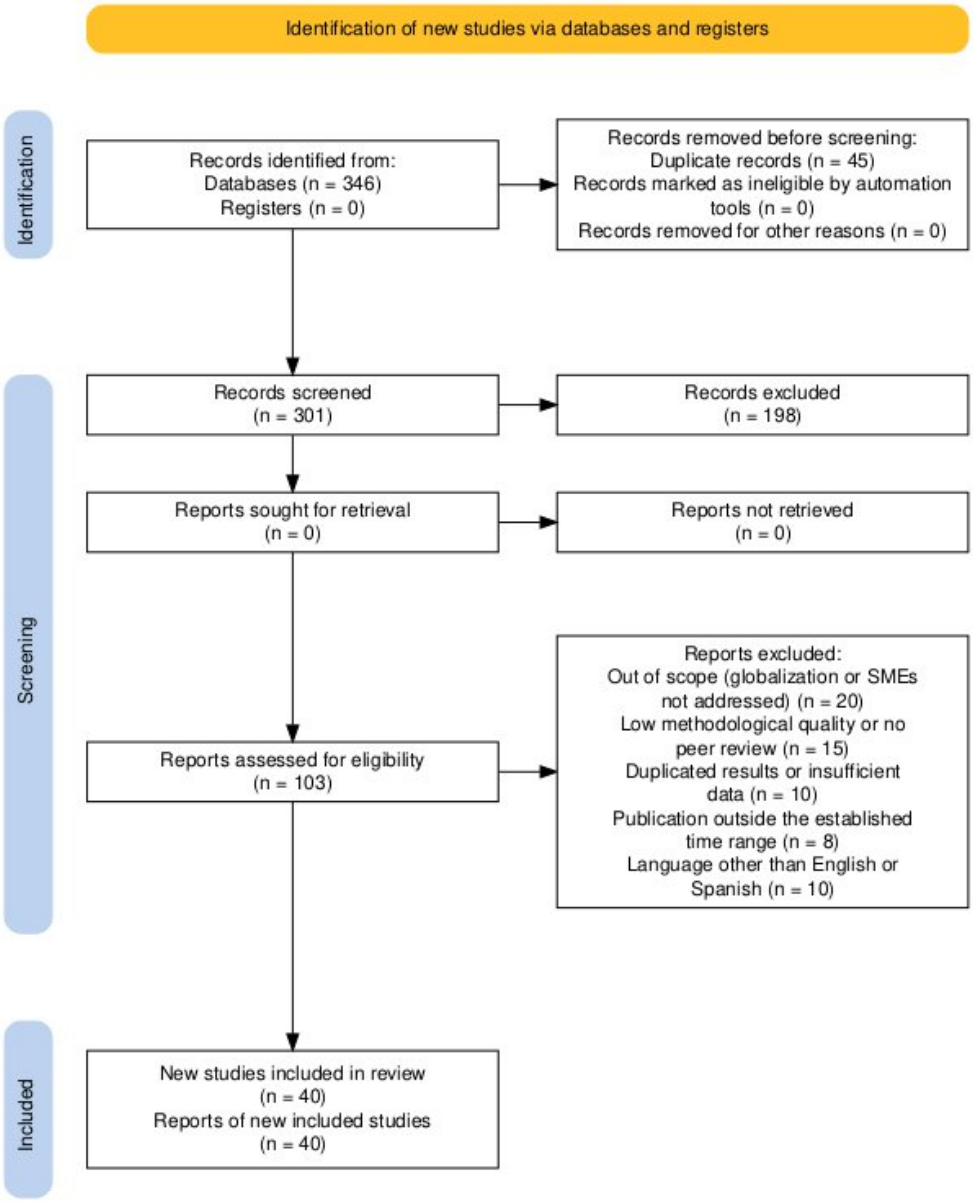
The geographical distribution of the selected studies is as follows: Mexico (11), Peru (5), Colombia (6), Argentina (3), Chile (3), Ecuador (2), Brazil (3), Bolivia (1), Uruguay (1), Venezuela (1), and others (5). This regional diversity allowed for the contrast of approaches, policies, and business dynamics across various national contexts. Collectively, the 40 studies provide a robust and multidimensional perspective on the relationship between globalization and the competitiveness of SMEs, highlighting factors such as digital transformation, access to financing, institutional articulation, and the design of public policies.

To ensure traceability and transparency in the study selection process, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method was applied, a widely-used framework in systematic reviews. This approach structured the documentation of the stages of identification, selection, eligibility, and inclusion of research, beginning with an initial search across five academic databases (Web of Science, ProQuest, SciELO, Dialnet, and Scopus) and culminating in the final corpus analyzed. Utilizing the PRISMA diagram, the process from 46 initial records to the inclusion of 40 studies was visualized, following rigorous criteria for thematic relevance, regional focus, and editorial quality. This methodological tool strengthened the consistency of the comparative analysis and clearly delineated the corpus of sources considered.

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Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram for the selection of studies included in the systematic review



Note. The adapted PRISMA diagram follows the methodological structure proposed by Haddaway et al. (2022), which guides the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies in systematic reviews. In this case, of the initial 346 articles, only 40 met the established criteria for quality, thematic relevance, and temporal scope.

Results and discussion

Key research themes on globalization and SMEs in Latin America

The selected articles reveal a series of research themes that have been categorized into ten distinct categories, each represented in varying numbers of publications (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Categories derived from research themes on globalization and SMEs in Latin America



Evidence from the reviewed studies indicates that regional integration and institutional cooperation remain the most fragile components in the development of Latin American SMEs. Peña (2023), López (2020), Leónova (2021), and Mora Ramírez (2022) agree that low inter-country coordination hinders both internationalization and technological transfer. Furthermore, Cuevas and Ruiz (2023) and Gil-Gaytán and Cárdenas-Gil (2022) warn that agreements such as the USMCA operate unevenly, diminishing the effective participation of small enterprises. Bonialian (2021) and Marichal (2024) add that transregional connections with China and Europe may create dependencies if not accompanied by collaborative innovation policies.

In parallel, political and regulatory interference presents a structural barrier. Morin and Langle (2024), Pineda (2021), and Muibo, Prats, and Guzmán (2022) emphasize that bureaucracy, regulatory inconsistency, and limited business participation constrain competitiveness. Additionally, the weakness of university-business-state initiatives, as documented by Gil-Gaytán and Cárdenas-Gil (2022) and Cuevas and Ruiz (2023), is linked to insufficient managerial training highlighted by Costa et al. (2024) and Cifuentes et al. (2023). The articulation among the public, private, and academic sectors is also limited. Aguirre and Mori (2025), Gabino et al. (2025), and Scotti and García (2023) demonstrate the lack of appropriate financial instruments, while Martínez and Romo (2024), Tatunts (2021), and Dussel (2022) indicate that economic instability heightens the vulnerability of SMEs. In this context, the weak cooperation noted by Peña (2023) and Bonialian (2021) restricts the formation of innovative networks. Finally, Levy (2023), Vite (2023), and Ludeña (2024) propose reconfiguring productive policy through science and technology, complemented by contributions from Gabino et al. (2025) and Costa et al. (2024) regarding training and innovation. Moreover, Mendoza (2024), Sáenz et al. (2024), and Hurtado et al. (2021) link internationalization and digital transformation as core components of sustainable development.

The theme of “organizational productivity and efficiency” reflects that improving productivity is a common goal in studies concerning SMEs (López, 2020; Peña, 2023). Gabino et al. (2025) connect efficiency to internal capabilities, cautioning that poor management diminishes operational performance. Torres and Sánchez (2022) analyze how digital marketing influences sustainable growth, while Ruiz (2021) addresses post-pandemic productive development. Furthermore, Costa et al. (2024) and Ludeña (2024) emphasize that organizational efficiency is closely related to institutional articulation and the strategic use of emerging technologies.

The theme of “leadership and organizational culture” suggests that organizational culture is crucial in times of crisis (Morin & Langle, 2024; Olmedo, 2023). Villegas (2022) posits that resilient leadership is essential for navigating global uncertainty and maintaining positive working conditions. Hurtado et al. (2021) and Sáenz et al. (2024) discuss organizational change as a response to globalization, highlighting the role of leadership in

adaptation. Gabino et al. (2025) further underscore the importance of human capital and corporate culture as internal factors of competitiveness. Additionally, Dussel (2022) and Tatunts (2021) examine how governance models and soft power influence organizational culture and the capacity for strategic leadership in Latin America.

Key contributions and research proposals on globalization opportunities for SMEs in Latin America

The contribution titled “Strengthening internal capacities (management, innovation, leadership, and human capital),” found in 21 of the 27 studies, as indicated in Table 1 (Contributions and Frequency), highlights the necessity of consolidating organizational skills to navigate globalized environments (Costa et al., 2024; Cifuentes et al., 2023; Ludeña, 2024). Gabino et al. (2025) and Mendoza (2024) concur that strategic management, innovation, and the development of human capital are essential pillars for enhancing the competitiveness and resilience of Latin American SMEs. Similarly, Ruiz (2021) and Morin and Langle (2024) address organizational leadership as a key factor in transformative contexts, while Olmedo (2023) and Tatunts (2021) reflect on corporate culture and its link to governance models and soft power.

The theme of “Promotion of gradual and strategic internationalization,” identified in 19 studies per Table 1 (Contributions and Frequency), posits that SMEs should progressively expand into international markets (Bonialian, 2021; Leónova, 2021; López, 2020). Mendoza (2024) proposes models such as the Uppsala and business networks, while Sáenz et al. (2024) analyze local experiences where internationalization unfolds in stages, accruing knowledge and reducing risks. Chuya et al. (2021) and Veiga (2021) highlight the role of the digital economy as a facilitator of this process, whereas Dussel (2022) and Tatunts (2021) caution against the geopolitical and commercial challenges faced by SMEs in global integration.

“Improvement of access to financing and financial education,” present in 17 studies according to the table, illustrates how a lack of liquidity and financial literacy constrains SME growth (Marichal, 2024; López, 2020; Peña, 2023). Aguirre and Mori (2025) connect this issue to low levels of financial education, while Gabino et al. (2025) and Scotti and García (2023) advocate for policies aimed at facilitating access to productive credit, particularly in post-pandemic contexts. Moreover, Dussel (2022) and Tatunts (2021) examine how global economic models influence the availability of financing, and Martínez and Romo (2024) document how digital transformation can enhance financial traceability and accounting management in micro and small enterprises.

The study “Implementation of specific public policies for SMEs” emerges as the most frequently mentioned contribution in Table 1 (Contributions and Frequency), appearing in 22 mentions. This underscores the need for designing regulatory frameworks tailored to the sector's realities (Peña, 2023; Morin and Langle, 2024; Pineda, 2021). Levy (2023) proposes a sovereign development approach, while Cuevas and Ruiz (2023) advocate for including SMEs in agreements like the USMCA. Vite (2023) and Muibo et al. (2022) suggest accounting and commercial reforms that promote regional integration. Dussel (2022) explores how global economic models constrain the formulation of public policies, and Costa et al. (2024) and Ludeña (2024) emphasize the necessity of incorporating innovation and professional training criteria into inclusive policy design.

“Development of digital infrastructure and technological adoption,” prevalent in 16 studies as noted in Table 1, highlights the importance of digital transformation for competitiveness (Costa et al., 2024; Cifuentes et al., 2023; Ludeña, 2024). Martínez and Romo (2024) document advancements driven by the pandemic, while Freire (2024), Veiga (2021), and Chuya et al. (2021) analyze how digital tools enable SMEs to internationalize, automate, and enhance productive processes. Additionally, Bonialian (2021) and Tatunts (2021) caution that technological infrastructure must be accompanied by regional strategies to avoid digital divides and technological dependency.

The focus on “Resilient leadership and organizational culture in crisis contexts,” identified in 10 studies in Table 1, underscores the role of authentic leadership in uncertain scenarios (Morin & Langle, 2024; Olmedo, 2023; Costa et al., 2024). Villegas (2022) posits that leadership should be empathetic and oriented toward collective well-being, while Hurtado et al. (2021) and Gabino et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of human capital and organizational culture as transformation and sustainability factors. Ruiz (2021) details how organizational leadership was pivotal in post-pandemic productive recovery, while Tatunts (2021) and Dussel (2022) reflect on the impact of governance models and soft power on Latin American corporate culture.

“Inclusion of SMEs in trade agreements and international treaties,” identified in 11 studies within the Contributions and Frequency table, advocates for the active consideration of SMEs in economic integration processes (Bonialian, 2021; Marichal, 2024; Peña, 2023). Muibo et al. (2022) caution against regulatory fragmentation, while Cuevas and Ruiz (2023) evaluate Chapter 25 of the USMCA as both an opportunity and a challenge for the effective inclusion of the sector in international trade. Tatunts (2021) examines how bilateral relations and soft power influence SME participation in foreign trade, while Dussel (2022) calls for rethinking international insertion frameworks from a more equitable and strategic perspective.

Table 1
Frequency of contributions or proposals made in the articles

Main contribution / proposal	Frequency (number of studies)
Strengthening internal capacities (management, innovation, leadership, human capital)	24
Promotion of gradual and strategic internationalization	23
Improvement of access to financing and financial education	22
Implementation of specific public policies for SMEs	27
Development of digital infrastructure and technological adoption	19
Institutional articulation: university–enterprise–state	18
Regulatory reforms and accounting harmonization to facilitate regional integration	19
Promotion of business networks and regional cooperation	12
Continuous business training and managerial professionalization	21
Inclusion of SMEs in trade agreements and international treaties	15
Focus on resilient leadership and organizational culture in crisis contexts	11
Overcoming informality through formalization and digitization strategies	9
Adaptation to post-pandemic scenarios with flexible and sustainable models	15
Critical evaluation of the neoliberal model and proposed sovereign development	15
Use of digital marketing and virtual tools for commercial expansion	14

One of the most frequently mentioned contributions is the strengthening of internal capacities, present in 21 studies. Authors such as Gabino et al. (2025) and Mendoza (2024) emphasize that strategic management, innovation, and human capital are foundational for navigating the volatility of the global environment. This focus is closely linked to the necessity for continuous business training, also addressed in 18 investigations, which identify insufficient managerial training as a structural barrier to internationalization and technological adoption (Aguirre & Mori, 2025; Costa et al., 2024; Cifuentes et al., 2023; Hernández, 2022).

Regarding the external environment, the most frequently noted contribution—found in 22 studies—is the implementation of specific public policies for SMEs. Levy (2023) suggests rethinking the Latin American development model from a sovereign perspective, while Cuevas and Ruiz (2023) advocate for greater inclusion of the sector in international treaties such as the USMCA. These proposals are complemented by calls for regulatory reforms and accounting harmonization, highlighted in 12 studies, which identify regulatory fragmentation as a barrier to regional integration (Muibo et al., 2022; Dussel, 2022; Pineda, 2021).

Gradual and strategic internationalization, addressed in 19 studies, presents a viable pathway for SMEs to access global markets without compromising their sustainability (Bonialian, 2021; Leónova, 2021; López, 2020). Mendoza (2024) revisits models such as Uppsala and business networks. This approach correlates with the contribution concerning inclusion in trade agreements, present in 11 studies, which advocates for a more active participation of SMEs in multilateral negotiations (Cuevas & Ruiz, 2023; Tatunts, 2021; Marichal, 2024).

Digital transformation and technological adoption are highlighted in 16 studies as a crucial tool for competitiveness (Costa et al., 2024; Cifuentes et al., 2023; Ludeña, 2024). Studies by Martínez and Romo (2024) and Freire (2024) document advancements triggered by the pandemic, while Chuya et al. (2021) illustrate how the digital economy enhances productivity in local contexts. Veiga (2021) emphasizes the role of digital tools in the internationalization of Latin American businesses, and Bonialian (2021) warns about the technological challenges in trade relations with China. However, this modernization necessitates adequate infrastructure and institutional articulation, addressed in 15 studies, which underscore the need for cooperation between universities, businesses, and the state (Gil & Cárdenas, 2022; Mora, 2022; Marichal, 2024).

Lastly, resilient leadership and organizational culture are positioned as key factors in crisis contexts, according to 10 studies (Morin & Langle, 2024; Olmedo, 2023; Tatunts, 2021). Villegas (2022) argues that authentic leadership helps maintain positive working conditions, while Hurtado et al. (2021) and Gabino et al. (2025) highlight the role of human capital in organizational transformation. This perspective is complemented by post-pandemic adaptation proposals present in 13 studies, suggesting flexible and sustainable models to confront uncertain scenarios (Ruiz, 2021; Martínez & Romo, 2024; Peña, 2023).

Overall, the contributions systematically compiled in the Contributions and Frequency table reflect that while there is consensus on the factors influencing the competitiveness of SMEs, gaps persist in the effective

implementation of policies, inter-institutional articulation, and overcoming structural barriers such as financing and informality (Dussel, 2022; Pineda, 2021; López, 2020). The discussion implies that strengthening the SME ecosystem in Latin America requires not only technical reforms but also a cultural and institutional transformation that recognizes the strategic role of these enterprises in regional development.

Conclusions

Strategic management, innovation, resilient leadership, and human capital development are essential pillars for navigating globalized environments. However, these capabilities must be complemented by specific public policies, effective institutional collaboration, and access to financing to generate a sustainable business ecosystem.

Technological adoption, accelerated by the pandemic, has proven to be a key tool for enhancing productive processes, expanding markets, and strengthening financial traceability. Nevertheless, effective implementation requires digital infrastructure, technical training, and intersectoral cooperation.

Regulatory fragmentation, informality, limited inclusion in international treaties, and weak university–business–state collaboration continue to affect the ability of SMEs to integrate into global value chains. Addressing these gaps necessitates both technical and cultural reforms that acknowledge the strategic role of the sector in regional development.

Models such as Uppsala and business networks facilitate knowledge accumulation, risk reduction, and the strengthening of organizational resilience. These strategies must be accompanied by inclusive policies that actively consider SMEs in multilateral negotiations and trade agreements.

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