Sarhad Journal of Legal Studies
ISSN: 3106-7441 (Print) 3106-745X (Online)
July-December 2026, Vol. 02, No. 02, [37–47]
Published: 30th September 2026
Publisher: Sarhad Institute of Legal Studies, SUIT
https://journal.suit.edu.pk/index.php/sjls
RESEARCH PAPER

Competition Law and Market Power: Cartels, Dominance, Mergers, and the Digital Economy

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ABSTRACT

Competition law, known in the United States as antitrust law, regulates private economic power so that markets remain open, rivalrous, and responsive to consumers. This article analyzes the field as a branch of commercial law that operates through public enforcement rather than private bargaining. It examines the intellectual origins of competition regulation, the competing schools of thought that shape its interpretation, and the three core pillars of modern enforcement: the prohibition of anticompetitive agreements, the control of abusive or monopolizing conduct by dominant firms, and the review of mergers. It then assesses the enforcement toolkit, including fines, leniency programs, and private damages actions, before analyzing the challenges that digital platforms and data-driven markets pose to traditional doctrine, using recent litigation against Google and the European Union's Digital Markets Act as illustrations. The article concludes that competition law remains indispensable but must reconcile legal certainty with economic complexity and the speed of technological change.

Keywords: competition law, antitrust, cartels, abuse of dominance, merger control, digital markets, consumer welfare.

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INTRODUCTION

Most commercial law assumes that markets exist and asks how parties can transact within them safely. Competition law asks a prior question: what keeps markets competitive in the first place? Contracts, corporate structures, and secured credit all presuppose that buyers and sellers can choose among alternatives. When firms agree to fix prices, when a dominant supplier forecloses rivals, or when a merger removes a close competitor, the market loses the discipline that rivalry provides, and the costs are borne by customers through higher prices, lower quality, reduced innovation, and narrower choice. The field is distinctive within commercial law for three reasons. First, its norms are largely mandatory: parties cannot contract out of them, and an agreement that violates competition law may be void or unenforceable. Second, it is enforced primarily by public authorities with investigative powers and the ability to impose large financial

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penalties, although private actions are increasingly important. Third, it depends heavily on economic analysis, since questions such as market definition, market power, and anticompetitive effect cannot be resolved by legal doctrine alone (Whish & Bailey, 2021). This article has four aims. It outlines the historical and theoretical foundations of competition law; analyzes the main categories of prohibited conduct and merger control; evaluates enforcement mechanisms and their limitations; and examines how digital markets are testing established frameworks. The analysis is comparative, drawing mainly on United States and European Union law, which have served as reference points for many other jurisdictions. It is an academic overview and not advice on any specific transaction or dispute (Khan, 2027).

ORIGINS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Historical Origins

Suspicion of monopoly has a long history in the common law, which at times treated grants of exclusive trading rights and contracts in restraint of trade as contrary to public policy. Modern competition law, however, emerged in response to the industrial concentration of the late nineteenth century. In the United States, the rise of trusts that controlled railroads, oil, and other industries provoked political demands for regulation, and Congress responded with the Sherman Act of 1890. Section 1 prohibits contracts, combinations, and conspiracies in restraint of trade, and Section 2 prohibits monopolization and attempts to monopolize (Sherman Act, 1890). The Clayton Act and the Federal Trade Commission Act, both enacted in 1914, added rules on specific practices and mergers and created a dedicated administrative agency. The Supreme Court's decision in Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey v. United States (1911) established the "rule of reason" as the general approach to Section 1, meaning that only unreasonable restraints are prohibited, judged by their competitive effects. Courts later identified categories of conduct, such as horizontal price fixing, treated as unlawful per se because their harmful effects are so predictable that case-by-case inquiry is unnecessary. In Europe, competition law developed later and with different emphases. Gerber (1998) shows that the European approach was shaped by the ordoliberal tradition, associated with German scholars who regarded economic freedom and competitive order as a legal and constitutional concern, and who feared that concentrated private power could threaten both markets and democratic institutions. When the founding treaties of the European Communities were drafted, competition rules were included as a core instrument of market integration. Today, Articles 101 and 102 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) prohibit anticompetitive agreements and abuse of dominant positions respectively, and Regulation 139/2004 governs merger control (Haider et al., 2026).

Competing Schools of Thought

The interpretation of competition statutes has been shaped by competing schools of economic and legal thought. The Chicago School, associated with Robert Bork and Richard Posner, argued that antitrust should pursue a single goal, economic efficiency, usually expressed through consumer welfare. Bork (1978) criticized earlier case law for protecting small competitors at the expense of efficiency, and Posner (2001) developed a rigorous economic framework in which many practices once condemned, such as vertical restraints, may be procompetitive. This

approach was influential in the United States from the 1970s onward and contributed to a more permissive treatment of vertical agreements and a heavier burden on plaintiffs. The post-Chicago literature qualified this view by showing, through game theory and industrial organization economics, that strategic behavior can harm competition even where simple models predict otherwise. Hovenkamp (2020) explains that modern doctrine reflects a synthesis in which efficiency remains central but is applied with attention to market structure, entry barriers, and the possibility of exclusionary conduct. More recently, a neo-Brandeisian or "new antitrust" movement has argued that a narrow focus on consumer prices fails to capture the broader harms of concentration, including effects on workers, suppliers, innovation, and democratic accountability. Khan (2017) argued that low prices and high market share can coexist with competitive harm when a platform controls infrastructure on which its rivals depend, and Wu (2018) contended that excessive economic concentration has political as well as economic consequences. Critics respond that expanding the goals of competition law risks vagueness, unpredictability, and enforcement driven by political preference rather than evidence. This debate is central to contemporary policy and shapes recent merger guidelines and enforcement priorities (Khan et al., 2026).

ANTICOMPETITIVE AGREEMENTS AND CARTELS

Horizontal Agreements

Agreements between competitors are the most serious form of anticompetitive conduct. Hard-core cartels, such as agreements to fix prices, rig bids, restrict output, or allocate markets or customers, are widely treated as the gravest violations because they have no plausible efficiency justification and directly transfer wealth from customers to participants. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) recommends that member countries adopt effective sanctions, investigative powers, and international cooperation to combat such cartels. Connor (2008) documented extensive international cartels across industries and estimated that overcharges can be substantial and long lasting, though the exact magnitude varies by case and method of estimation. Evidence of explicit agreements is difficult to obtain because participants conceal them. Authorities therefore rely on dawn raids, leniency applications, economic screening tools, and whistleblowers. A recurring legal question concerns tacit collusion or conscious parallelism, where firms in concentrated markets independently align their prices without an explicit agreement. Competition law generally requires some form of concerted practice or communication, and mere interdependence without agreement is not unlawful. The line becomes harder to draw when algorithms or information exchanges facilitate coordination without direct contact among competitors, an issue that regulators and scholars increasingly examine (Haider et al., 2026).

Vertical Agreements

Agreements between firms at different levels of the supply chain, such as manufacturers and distributors, present a more ambiguous picture. Resale price maintenance, exclusive distribution, and selective distribution may restrict competition between distributors of the same brand but can also stimulate competition among brands by encouraging investment in promotion

and service. In Continental T.V., Inc. v. GTE Sylvania Inc. (1977), the U.S. Supreme Court abandoned the per se rule for non-price vertical restraints in favor of the rule of reason, and in Leegin Creative Leather Products, Inc. v. PSKS, Inc. (2007) it extended that approach to minimum resale price maintenance. European law remains stricter in relation to resale price maintenance, treating it as a restriction of competition by object, although block exemptions offer safe harbors for vertical agreements below specified market-share thresholds (Whish & Bailey, 2021). This divergence illustrates a larger methodological point. Where the law adopts a categorical approach, enforcement is predictable and inexpensive but may condemn efficient conduct. Where it adopts an effects-based approach, outcomes are more economically precise but depend on costly and uncertain proof (Khan, 2025).

DOMINANCE, MONOPOLIZATION, AND EXCLUSIONARY CONDUCT

Market Power and Dominance

Having market power is not unlawful in either the American or European systems; the law targets the way in which it is acquired or exercised. In the United States, Section 2 of the Sherman Act requires the possession of monopoly power and its willful acquisition or maintenance, as distinguished from growth resulting from a superior product, business acumen, or historic accident. Judge Learned Hand's opinion in United States v. Aluminum Co. of America (1945) is a classic statement of this distinction. In the European Union, Article 102 TFEU prohibits abuse of a dominant position, which the Court of Justice has described as a position of economic strength enabling a firm to prevent effective competition and to behave to an appreciable extent independently of competitors, customers, and consumers (Hoffmann-La Roche v Commission, 1979). Market definition is the usual starting point for assessing dominance. Authorities identify the relevant product and geographic market, often by asking whether customers would switch to alternatives in response to a small but significant price increase, and then evaluate market shares, barriers to entry, and buyer power. In multi-sided and zero-price markets, such as digital platforms, this analysis becomes considerably more complex (Ghani et al., 2025).

Categories of Abuse & Defenses and Efficiencies

Exclusionary conduct includes predatory pricing, exclusive dealing, loyalty rebates, tying and bundling, refusals to supply, and margin squeeze. The common concern is that a dominant firm may use its position to foreclose rivals, not by competing more efficiently, but by raising their costs or denying access to necessary inputs or customers. Exploitative abuses, such as excessive pricing, are recognized in European law but rarely pursued, in part because authorities are reluctant to act as price regulators. The European Commission's decision against Microsoft, upheld in substantial part by the General Court in Microsoft v Commission (2007), concerned refusal to supply interoperability information and the tying of Windows Media Player to the Windows operating system. The case showed that a dominant firm may face special responsibilities not to leverage its position into adjacent markets. In the United States, by contrast, courts have generally been more cautious about imposing duties to deal with rivals, reflecting concern that such duties may reduce incentives to invest and innovate (Lu et al., 2025). Both systems accept that conduct which appears exclusionary may be justified by legitimate business reasons or efficiencies. A

dominant firm may defend a practice by showing that it is objectively necessary or that it produces benefits to consumers outweighing its anticompetitive effect. The burden of proof and the degree of evidence required differ between jurisdictions, and this remains an area of active doctrinal development (Mathlouthi et al., 2025).

MERGER CONTROL

Rationale and Procedure & Substantive Analysis

Unlike cartels and abuse of dominance, which are generally assessed after the conduct occurs, merger control is mainly preventive. Mergers can create efficiencies, such as economies of scale and combinations of complementary assets, but can also eliminate competition. Regimes therefore require advance notification for transactions above specified thresholds and allow authorities to block, modify, or approve them. In the United States, the Hart-Scott-Rodino Act requires pre-merger notification and a waiting period, while Section 7 of the Clayton Act prohibits acquisitions whose effect may be substantially to lessen competition. In the European Union, Regulation 139/2004 prohibits concentrations that significantly impede effective competition, particularly through the creation or strengthening of a dominant position (Khan et al., 2025).

Merger analysis distinguishes among horizontal mergers between competitors, vertical mergers between firms at different supply-chain levels, and conglomerate mergers between firms in unrelated markets. Horizontal mergers are the most likely to raise concerns, either through unilateral effects, where the merged firm can raise prices profitably without coordination, or through coordinated effects, where the market becomes more conducive to collusion. The Supreme Court in Brown Shoe Co. v. United States (1962) emphasized both market structure and the legislative concern with preserving competition, and the U.S. agencies' 2023 Merger Guidelines continue to apply structural presumptions based on market concentration alongside evidence of competitive effects (U.S. Department of Justice & Federal Trade Commission, 2023). Parties often propose remedies to address competition concerns. Structural remedies, such as divestiture of overlapping businesses, are generally preferred because they eliminate the problem at its source and require little continuing supervision. Behavioral remedies, such as commitments to provide access or refrain from certain conduct, are more difficult to monitor and may distort competition in other ways (Hui et al., 2025). Two concerns have gained prominence in recent practice. The first is so-called "killer acquisitions," where an incumbent acquires a nascent competitor to neutralize a future threat, often below traditional notification thresholds because the target has little revenue. The second is the accumulation of data and ecosystem advantages through acquisitions. These concerns have led several jurisdictions to adopt transaction-value thresholds, call-in powers, or updated guidelines designed to capture transactions that revenue-based tests might miss (Furman et al., 2019).

THE ENFORCEMENT ARCHITECTURE

Public Enforcement and Sanctions

Competition law depends on credible enforcement. Authorities such as the U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Trade Commission, and the European Commission have powers

to investigate, compel documents, conduct inspections, and impose sanctions. In the European Union, Regulation 1/2003 empowers the Commission and national competition authorities to apply Articles 101 and 102 directly, with fines that may reach ten percent of a firm's worldwide annual turnover. In the United States, criminal enforcement of cartels can result in substantial fines and imprisonment for individuals, reflecting the view that hard-core cartels are a form of theft from consumers. Administrative or civil sanctions apply in many other jurisdictions, and some also impose director disqualification. The central design question is deterrence. Fines must be large enough, and detection probable enough that the expected cost of violation exceeds the expected gain. Because detection is difficult, authorities supplement penalties with programs that reward cooperation (Khan & Ullah, 2024).

Leniency Programs: Leniency or immunity programs offer reduced or zero penalties to cartel members that report the conspiracy and cooperate with investigators. They exploit the instability of cartels: each participant has an incentive to defect first, and the first applicant typically receives the greatest benefit. These programs have become the primary source of cartel detection in many jurisdictions and are strongly endorsed in international guidance (OECD, 2019). Their effectiveness depends on a credible threat of severe sanctions for non-applicants and on transparency about the conditions of eligibility. Critics note that leniency can allow ringleaders to escape punishment and may be affected by exposure to follow-on private damages claims, a concern that several jurisdictions address through special protections for leniency statements (Khan, 2024).

Private Enforcement: Private actions by injured parties supplement public enforcement by providing compensation and additional deterrence. The United States has a long tradition of private enforcement, including treble damages and class actions. In Europe, private enforcement has expanded following legislative reforms that facilitate damages claims, ease access to evidence, and allow claimants to rely on prior decisions of competition authorities. Obstacles remain, including the cost and complexity of economic evidence, the difficulty of proving the amount of overcharge, and the pass-on of overcharges through supply chains. Collective redress mechanisms attempt to address situations where individual losses are too small to justify separate litigation (Khan, 2024).

Procedure and Fairness: Because competition authorities combine investigative and decision-making functions in many systems, procedural safeguards, including the right to be heard, access to the file, legal professional privilege, and judicial review, are essential. In the European Union, Commission decisions are reviewable by the General Court and the Court of Justice, which examine both legality and the sufficiency of the evidence. This review contributes to the development of doctrine and constrains arbitrary enforcement (Khan & Jiliani, 2023).

COMPETITION LAW IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

Distinctive Features of Digital Markets

Digital markets exhibit characteristics that complicate traditional analysis. Network effects mean that a service becomes more valuable as more people use it, which can drive markets toward concentration. Multi-sided platforms serve distinct groups, such as users and advertisers, whose interests and prices are interdependent. Many services are offered at zero monetary price, funded

by data collection or advertising, making price-based tests of market power inadequate. Data itself can be both an input and a barrier to entry. Ezrachi and Stucke (2016) argue that these features, together with algorithms and behavioral targeting, can produce forms of competitive harm that are subtle and difficult to detect. The United Kingdom's Digital Competition Expert Panel concluded that existing frameworks required adaptation and recommended a new regulatory approach for firms with strategic market status, including enforceable codes of conduct and measures to promote data mobility and interoperability (Furman et al., 2019). The report is significant because it shifts emphasis from case-by-case litigation toward ex ante regulation of platforms that act as gatekeepers (Khan et al., 2023).

Enforcement against Digital Platforms

Recent cases illustrate both the promise and the limits of traditional tools. In Google Shopping, the European Commission found that Google abused its dominance by favoring its own comparison shopping service in general search results, and the General Court upheld the decision in 2021 (Google and Alphabet v Commission, 2021). This case applied established abuse-of-dominance principles to a platform's treatment of its own services. In the United States, the Department of Justice and a group of states sued Google over its search business. In August 2024, the district court found that Google unlawfully maintained a monopoly in general search services and search text advertising (United States v. Google LLC, 2024). In September 2025, the court declined the government's request for the most far-reaching remedies, such as forced divestiture of the Chrome browser, and instead ordered behavioral measures, including a prohibition on exclusive distribution contracts for Google's search and related products and requirements to share certain data with competitors. Both sides have appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit; in July 2026 the government plaintiffs argued in their briefing that the lower court should reconsider a ban on Google's payments to distributors, citing concern that a window for competition from generative artificial intelligence could close (MLex, 2026). As of the date of writing, the appeal remains pending, so the outcome should not be treated as settled law. The case is instructive on several levels. It confirms that courts remain willing to find liability in technology markets, but it also illustrates the difficulty of fashioning effective remedies in fast-moving industries. Structural remedies are disruptive and uncertain, while behavioral remedies depend on monitoring and may be overtaken by technological change (Khan et al., 2023).

Ex Ante Regulation: The Digital Markets Act & Algorithms and Artificial Intelligence

The European Union has responded with legislation. The Digital Markets Act, Regulation 2022/1925, designates large platforms as "gatekeepers" and imposes a list of obligations and prohibitions, such as restrictions on self-preferencing, requirements of interoperability and data access, and limits on combining personal data across services without consent. Unlike Article 102, the regulation does not require a case-by-case showing of dominance and anticompetitive effect for each practice; it applies per se obligations to designated firms, with fines for noncompliance. Supporters argue that this approach is faster and more predictable, while critics worry about regulatory rigidity, compliance cost, and the risk of discouraging innovation or harming consumers through reduced functionality. Whether such ex ante regimes complement or displace conventional competition enforcement is an open question that will shape the field. Pricing algorithms and

machine-learning systems raise questions about collusion and fairness. Algorithms may facilitate coordination by monitoring competitors' prices and responding rapidly, and sophisticated systems may in theory learn to maintain supracompetitive prices without explicit instruction (Ezrachi & Stucke, 2016). Existing law generally treats the use of a common pricing tool by competitors, or the exchange of competitively sensitive information through it, as potentially unlawful, but liability for independently adopted algorithms that converge on high prices remains uncertain. At the same time, control over computing capacity, data, and foundation models raises questions about entry barriers and partnerships between established firms and new entrants. Authorities in many jurisdictions have begun studying these markets, but doctrine is still evolving (Khan, 2023).

COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

Competition law has spread widely. Most economies now have a competition statute and an agency, and many have modeled their laws on European or American approaches, often adapting them to local institutions and development priorities. Developing and small economies face particular challenges: limited agency resources, concentrated markets, prevalence of state-owned or politically connected enterprises, and the need to balance competition goals with industrial or social policy. Because commerce is global, conduct in one country can affect markets in others. The effects doctrine, accepted in both the United States and European Union, allows authorities to apply their laws to foreign conduct that has substantial effects within their territories. This extraterritorial reach creates risks of conflicting standards and duplicative proceedings, particularly in merger review, where a global transaction may require clearance from many authorities with different timetables and standards. International cooperation through bilateral agreements, information-sharing arrangements, and forums such as the OECD helps coordinate enforcement, though there is no binding global competition code (OECD, 2019). Convergence therefore occurs mostly through soft law, peer learning, and the influence of leading jurisdictions.

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES AND DIRECTIONS FOR REFORM

Several debates are likely to shape the future of competition law. The first concerns objectives. If the goal is limited to consumer welfare as measured by price and output, enforcement is more predictable but may overlook harms in labor markets, innovation, and resilience. If goals are broadened to include fairness, democracy, or sustainability, the law risks losing analytic discipline. Many authorities now attempt a middle path, retaining effects-based analysis while paying greater attention to nonprice dimensions such as quality, privacy, and innovation. The second concerns the standard of proof and the allocation of burdens. Critics of narrow doctrines argue that heavy burdens on plaintiffs allow harmful practices to persist, particularly in complex digital markets where evidence is asymmetrical. Proposals include rebuttable presumptions for large mergers, stronger structural presumptions, and reversed burdens for dominant firms. Opponents warn that such presumptions may condemn procompetitive conduct and create uncertainty that discourages investment. The third concerns institutional capacity. Even well-designed legal rules are ineffective without well-resourced, independent agencies and courts able to evaluate complex economic evidence. Delays are costly: by the time a case concludes, the market may have changed, as the long duration of major technology cases illustrates. Faster procedures, interim measures, and ex ante regulation are partly responses to this problem. The

fourth concerns the interaction of competition law with other policy areas, including data protection, consumer protection, intellectual property, trade, and industrial policy. Conduct may raise issues under several regimes at once, and coordination among regulators is necessary to avoid inconsistency. For example, privacy practices may be relevant to competition where data accumulation strengthens market power, but privacy law and competition law protect different interests and should not be conflated (Khan & Ximei, 2022).

CONCLUSION:

Competition law protects the conditions under which other branches of commercial law operate. By prohibiting cartels, constraining the abuse of dominance, and reviewing mergers, it seeks to preserve open markets where firms succeed through merit and consumers benefit from choice, quality, and innovation. Its development has been shaped by competing intellectual traditions, from ordoliberal concern with economic order to Chicago School emphasis on efficiency and the contemporary debate about concentration and power. The field is now at an inflection point. Digital platforms challenge assumptions about market definition, pricing, and remedies, and legislatures and courts are experimenting with new tools, from effects-based litigation to ex ante gatekeeper regulation. The ongoing appeals in the Google search litigation and the implementation of the Digital Markets Act will provide important evidence on what works. Whatever the outcome, the underlying task remains the same: to identify and restrain practices that harm the competitive process without penalizing the vigorous rivalry that the law is designed to protect. Achieving this balance requires clear legal standards, rigorous economic analysis, effective institutions, and continued empirical study of the effects of enforcement.

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