

Necessary condition analysis for sustainable channel governance in fast-moving markets

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to analyse marketing channel governance through the most relevant elements of the relationship (commitment, trust, dependence and enforcement) in light of a new analytical method - necessary condition analysis (NCA) - that brings fresh perspectives to previous studies. The overlooked fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector is chosen to test the proposed model because its high product turnover and changing consumer demands make effective management and close collaboration between trading partners even more necessary than in other sectors.

Design/methodology/approach - Based on a sample of 204 Spanish distributors - both wholesalers and retailers - in the FMCG sector distribution channel who were contacted through LinkedIn, a governance model in the distribution channel is established and validated via structural model analysis using PLS-SEM, NCA and predictive performance analysis.

Findings - The results provide empirical support for the proposed model from the perspective of probability, establishing an efficient distribution channel governance formula in FMCG. However, analysis of the proposed relationships in terms of necessity reveals that a high level of social and contractual enforcement cannot be achieved without a certain level of trust and commitment between partners, but that it can be achieved without any dependence.

Practical implications - The study highlights that fostering trust and commitment is essential for governance in FMCG distribution channels, as dependence alone is not a necessary condition for achieving strong contractual and social enforcement. Managers should focus on long-term relationship building rather than short-term transactional gains to enhance channel performance. Given the competitive nature of the FMCG sector and the increasing power of retailers, companies can improve governance effectiveness by investing in relational mechanisms that strengthen collaboration with their partners.

Originality/value - The research provides novel tools for marketing channel governance in FMCG and contributes to alternative explanations to account for good performance in the agreements established in the distribution channel, as opposed to formulas based on the imbalance of bargaining power and different strategic interests among channel agents.

Keywords Relationship, Enforcement, Marketing channel, FMCG, PLS-SEM, Necessary condition analysis (NCA)

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Business literature has highlighted the relevance of commitment in interorganizational relationships as a fundamental pillar for the stability and success of business exchanges. This study analyses trust and dependence as critical antecedents in the construction of commitment, exploring how these dimensions influence the formation and maintenance of quality and long-lasting

relationships in distribution channels (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Du and Zhang, 2017; Gilliland and Bello, 2002).

Trust, which is defined as the belief in the trustworthiness and integrity of the business partner and dependence, which is understood as the need for the partner's resources *vis-à-vis* achieving goals, are key to establishing a solid and practical commitment (Andaleeb, 1996; Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). These dimensions of the relationships encourage cooperation between partners and promote the investment of time, effort and resources necessary to

maintain this long-term strategic alliance (Du and Zhang, 2017; Johnston *et al.*, 2018).

Commitment – which is built on trust and dependence – plays a crucial role in direct channel governance. This commitment manifests itself through aligning actions and decisions with common goals, reducing conflicts and facilitating the functional resolution of conflicts when they occur (Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Watson *et al.*, 2015). Solid commitment ensures long-term orientation, thereby improving performance and reducing the costs associated with the exchange process (Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015).

Trust and dependence thus directly contribute to commitment and, when mediated by commitment, indirectly contribute to channel governance. These indirect relationships strengthen the cohesion and resilience of business networks, promoting social norms and cooperative behaviours that are key to the sustainable success of all parties involved (Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Engagement mediation ensures that actions and beliefs are aligned with shared network goals, thereby generating an environment of mutual support and shared benefits that strengthen the structure and dynamics of distribution channels (Du and Zhang, 2017; Johnston *et al.*, 2018).

This study focuses on the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) channel because of its competitive dynamics and constant need for operational optimisation (Weaven *et al.*, 2021). Historically, inter-firm relationships in this sector have shown little effectiveness, as they focus on transactional decisions to achieve short-term economic efficiency (Mahama-Musah *et al.*, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2019). This approach has resulted in a need for greater cohesion and coordination among channel actors. We chose the FMCG sector because its high product turnover and changing consumer demands require effective management and close collaboration between trading partners (Vyshak *et al.*, 2023). Notably, a significant portion of this channel serves HORECA businesses, reinforcing the business-to-business (B2B) nature of industrial marketing in this context. Effective governance in these B2B relationships is crucial for aligning supply chain strategies, fostering innovation in products and services and enhancing long-term partnerships. By addressing these aspects, our study contributes to industrial marketing by providing insights into how firms can build more resilient and cooperative distribution networks, ultimately driving competitive and sustainable growth in the FMCG sector.

In addition, one critical gap in the research on FMCG distribution channels is the limited impact of e-commerce compared to other sectors, which highlights the need for traditional governance mechanisms and strategic management of interorganizational relationships to ensure channel efficiency and effectiveness. This research seeks to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive understanding of how trust and dependence influence commitment within the FMCG distribution channel and how this commitment affects social and contractual enforcement.

The research questions we therefore seek to answer are as follows:

RQ1. Do trust and dependence affect commitment in the FMCG sector?

RQ2. Do they also affect social and contractual enforcement?

RQ3. Are they necessary conditions for social and contractual enforcement to occur?

In addition, control variables such as firm size, distributor type and respondent gender are taken into account in an effort to understand their influence on the relationships proposed in the model.

To answer these questions – and based on a sample of 204 Spanish distributors in the FMCG channel that includes both wholesalers and retailers – a model of governance in the distribution channel is established and validated by applying structural model analysis using PLS-SEM. Our study adopts a confirmatory, explanatory and predictive approach and also applies a new method that helps us to examine the phenomena from the perspective of necessity rather than probability (Dul, 2016), which leads us to extract relevant and refreshing conclusions. We thus contribute to the current understanding of governance in the FMCG distribution channel and establish the conditions through which the relationships show efficient channel management.

In this way, we contribute to the literature by addressing two types of gaps (Jacobs, 2011; Miles, 2017; Müller-Bloch and Kranz, 2015). On the one hand, we address the Practical–Knowledge Gap, as channel governance has shown shortcomings in explaining how it functions in sectors such as FMCG. In particular, the governance of this sector has been analysed from the perspectives of power and transactional efficiency, which have shown limited effectiveness in explaining relationships. On the other hand, we address the methodological gap, as necessary condition analysis (NCA) can ascertain whether a specific circumstance is necessary for a particular outcome and can gauge the magnitude of its impact (Dul, 2016). Both ceiling envelopment (CE) and ceiling regression (CR) techniques were chosen to create robust functions.

After this introductory section, Section 2 sets out the hypotheses development, while Section 3 describes the methodological aspects. Section 4 then offers the results, while Section 5 discusses the results. Finally, Section 6 presents the main conclusions.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1 Trust and dependence as antecedents of commitment

The literature indicates that “Behavioral-based theories and constructs have become more important than economic-based theories and constructs” (Watson *et al.*, 2015, p. 552). In this way, we propose that governance in the distribution channel is best explained by theories such as Commitment–Trust theory (social exchange theory) (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and relational norms (social psychology) (Macneil, 1980). This situation suggests that the appropriate governance methodology is provided by relational governance (relationship marketing) (Heide, 1994; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006) and coercion (power dependence) (Antia *et al.*, 2006; Gilliland *et al.*, 2010; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; John, 1984).

Commitment has been installed in the business literature as the most frequent explanation for stable, quality and successful

exchange relationships and is the focus of interorganizational relational performance research, particularly in the area of marketing channels (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Du and Zhang, 2017; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006; Sharma *et al.*, 2015; Vinhas and Gibbs, 2018; Watson *et al.*, 2015). Commitment is the “highest stage of relational bonding” (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987, p. 23) and therefore a situation wherein parties establish long-term strategic alliances by investing time, effort and resources (Du and Zhang, 2017; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Yet in addition to promoting cooperative actions, commitment also instils in the parties, the need to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship (Andaleeb, 1996; Gimeno-Arias, 2021; Johnston *et al.*, 2018). It has often been shown that if actions are not accompanied by beliefs, the relationship between business partners suffers (Du and Zhang, 2017). In addition to behavioural actions, attitudinal commitment is also required to instil total commitment in the relationship (Gilliland and Bello, 2002).

Action and belief are what endow commitment with a dual dimension that has become evident in the literature through the establishment of calculative or economic commitment and affective or loyalty commitment (Brown *et al.*, 2019; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015). Calculative commitment is thus the “action” of incorporating interests and costs in the decisions, assessing the investment and earnings linked to the exchange relationship and the cost involved in leaving (Du and Zhang, 2017; Gilliland and Bello, 2002). Affective commitment is the “belief” guided by affection and obligation towards the other party because it is a consistent relationship due to its contribution to the objectives, values and philosophy of business partners (Brown *et al.*, 2019; Du and Zhang, 2017). Governance scholars thus conceptualize attitudinal commitment as a (calculative and affective) rational and emotional mixture related through the notion of relationship continuance (Gilliland and Bello, 2002).

Although both dimensions of the concept of commitment are well established in the academic marketing literature (Brown *et al.*, 2019; Gimeno-Arias *et al.*, 2023; Ponder *et al.*, 2016), what is not clear, however, is whether or not they can be disassociated from each other (Sharma *et al.*, 2015). The lack of consensus among scholars leads us to believe that both dimensions act in a coordinated and inseparable manner because some studies have focused on their affective aspects (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Johnston *et al.*, 2018; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sharma *et al.*, 2015; Vinhas and Gibbs, 2018), while others have established the two-fold dimension of the concept (Du and Zhang, 2017; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015). In both cases, evidence of how commitment impacts interorganizational relationships has been found. We thus consider commitment to be a unique two-dimensional concept whose most complete definition is:

An exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23).

The role of commitment in business relationships is unquestionable because it builds successful long-term cooperation (Sharma *et al.*, 2015) as well as feelings of

obligation in the relationship between partners (Ponder *et al.*, 2016). This places commitment as the most advanced stage of the relationship (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), while at the same time making it the objective of all commercial relationships aimed at achieving stability and durability. Studies on the pillars of commitment in exchange relationships are thus a topic in which marketing academics invest time and effort (Andaleeb, 1996; Brown *et al.*, 2019; Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015; Suh *et al.*, 2019).

Although scholars see commitment as the most advanced stage of the relationship (Brown *et al.*, 2019; Du and Zhang, 2017; Johnston *et al.*, 2018; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Vinhas and Gibbs, 2018; Watson *et al.*, 2015), this by no means emerges spontaneously. The relationship between exchange partners must perforce go through previous stages until it reaches the consolidation that commitment entails (Andaleeb, 1996; Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015; Suh *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, we find broad consensus in the relational literature that trust comes before commitment (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) because it produces positive feelings of the exchange relationship (Sharma *et al.*, 2015). Although we found many conceptualizations of trust that include an evaluation of the reliability, credibility and honesty of the exchange partner, the most common interpretation is that a relationship of trust emerges when “one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23).

Trust emerges as the cornerstone of the strategic partnership because distrust is the opposite effect that prevents a good exchange relationship from becoming established between partners (Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). When trust is strengthened, it is strongly linked to commitment because trust generates value in business relationships (Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015), avoids decisions being taken that might prove detrimental to the partners (Andaleeb, 1996; Anderson and Narus, 1990), helps partners to fulfil their obligations in a benevolent manner (Brown *et al.*, 2019) and maintains a sense of acceptance and psychological support (Macneil, 1980; Suh *et al.*, 2019). The characteristics of trust described above place the concept very close to that of commitment (Sharma *et al.*, 2015).

Although the literature establishes strong linkages between trust and commitment (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), we also located a body of literature that establishes dependence linked to commitment (Andaleeb, 1995, 1996; Anderson and Narus, 1990; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Johnston *et al.*, 2018; Kim and Frazier, 1997; Scheer *et al.*, 2015). “Dependence is defined here as the degree to which a target firm needs the resources provided by the source firm to achieve its goals” (Andaleeb, 1996, p. 78). This definition shares with commitment the idea of placing at the heart of the relationship an implicit or explicit pledge to continue business cooperation (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Ferro *et al.*, 2016). Within the theoretical framework derived from social exchange, Commitment–Trust Theory has emerged as an explanation for improved performance through commitment, replacing earlier paradigms of distribution channel governance based on power or dependency (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Watson *et al.*, 2015). However, more recent studies have established that dependence has a particularly significant

impact on commitment when the relationships are beneficial to the parties (Vázquez-Casielles *et al.*, 2017). Some research has even gone so far as to consider implicit trust in certain types of dependence (Andaleeb, 1995) because when there is trust in the exchange partners, dependence is well-received (Andaleeb, 1996). This leads us to expect a similar effect of dependence on commitment as is found for that of trust.

Commitment has thus been established as a two-dimensional concept (Brown *et al.*, 2019; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015) that shows strong links with trust (Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and dependence (Johnston *et al.*, 2018; Scheer *et al.*, 2015). Although these trust–commitment and dependence–commitment links have been widely established in various industries (Du and Zhang, 2017; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015; Suh *et al.*, 2019), the literature lacks evidence in business such as FMCG distribution (Mahama-Musah *et al.*, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1. Trust has a positive impact on commitment between exchange partners in the FMCG marketing channel.
- H2. Dependence has a positive impact on commitment between exchange partners in the FMCG marketing channel.

2.2 Enforcement as a consequence of commitment

Once an attitudinal commitment has been reached in an exchange relationship, one of its main roles is to act as a pledge between business partners (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Ferro *et al.*, 2016). Its presence makes businesses have a long-term orientation and avoids conflicts (Watson *et al.*, 2015) and – should such conflicts occur – helps to resolve them functionally by seeking joint solutions that prevent unilateral decisions or even the breakup of the alliance (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This leads us to consider commitment with a tendency towards compliance (Sharma *et al.*, 2015). The effort that building the commitment requires in terms of time, effort and financial resources (Du and Zhang, 2017; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) makes us see it as a situation that forces the parties to maintain the relationship (Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Watson *et al.*, 2015), especially because of it improves performance by reducing the costs associated with the exchange process (Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015), given that firms spend less time managing and monitoring business partners, thus reducing relational costs (Williamson, 1975).

The concept of enforcement has been widely disseminated in the literature on exchange relationships from many different approaches, normally – and in the context of marketing channels – as a unilateral action by which the manufacturer ensures distributor compliance (Antia *et al.*, 2006; Antia and Frazier, 2001; Frazier, 1999). However, the source of enforcement in the distribution channel may be the authority of a commercial agreement or the obligations arising from a long-term relationship (such as trust, dependence and commitment) (Heide, 1994; Johnson and Sohi, 2016; Watson *et al.*, 2015). We see two mechanisms for enforcement development: contractual enforcement and social enforcement (Gilliland and

Bello, 2002). This gives rise to two formulas of distribution channel governance that are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that are often combined (Frazier, 1999; Watson *et al.*, 2015). The relationship is therefore an extension of the contract, as the contract does not foresee all situations but is perfected through the relationships (Gimeno-Arias and Santos-Jaén, 2022; Macneil, 1977, 1980).

The contractual enforcement mechanism is a “unilaterally applied coordination process by which the manufacturer relies on the contractual agreement to maintain the alignment of the distributor’s actions with its prior promises” (Gilliland and Bello, 2002, p. 29) and can be explicitly written or implicitly unwritten (Heide, 1994). Its power lies in the fact that it can include social ostracism or termination of the business relationship (Antia *et al.*, 2006) and can even lead to legal action being taken to enforce it (Dutta *et al.*, 1994). This leads us to consider breach of contract as opportunism in the marketing channel relationship arising from the omission of obligations (Wathne and Heide, 2000). Although the literature has pointed to opportunism as a natural behaviour of economic agents (Williamson, 1975), believing that all distributors are always opportunistic may be too pessimistic and grim a view (John, 1984). In these circumstances, socialization is an effective management model for preventing opportunism (Hernández-Espallardo *et al.*, 2010; Wathne and Heide, 2004). Although it will not prevent opportunism, the presence of a solid relationship, such as commitment, will solve the issue functionally for the channel partners (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and will prevent more severe action from having to be taken (Antia *et al.*, 2006).

The social enforcement mechanism appeals to the value of the relationship as a way of sustaining it over time (Gilliland and Bello, 2002). It is an enforcement mechanism based on cooperative behaviour (Heide, 1994) and on emotional and economic experiences that position the relationship as a key element of business success (Johnston *et al.*, 2018; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sharma *et al.*, 2015). Relationships, therefore, “influence the development of shared social norms for regulating future exchange” (Gundlach *et al.*, 1995, p. 80). In this way, successful and strong relationships lead to the development of social norms that are accompanied by controls that compel partners to act in a certain way. “Socially-based controls direct actors through incentives to reward pro-social actions, enforcement mechanisms to sanction undesirable actions, and monitoring to ensure behaviours remain aligned” (Gilliland *et al.*, 2010, p. 442).

In the context of the Relational Norms Theory (Macneil, 1980), obligations are not only exercised contractually but also through the expectations created by the establishment of solid and lasting relationships. These norms “guide and regulate the standards of trade and conduct” (Watson *et al.*, 2015, p. 550). This reasoning leads us to determine a direct relationship between commitment and enforcement, in such a way that when enforcement on the distributor is contractual in origin, the relationship acts as an extension and perfection of the contract (Macneil, 1980), preventing opportunistic defaults and distributors from being aligned with their supplier (Hernández-Espallardo *et al.*, 2010; Wathne and Heide, 2004). On the other hand, when enforcement is of a social origin, the relationship *per se* obliges the distributor to comply with its

agreements, as the relationship itself brings greater benefits in the long run than unaligned opportunistic behaviour (Du and Zhang, 2017; Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2015). Our next hypotheses thus suggest as follows:

H3. Commitment is positively associated with the use of contractual enforcement mechanisms in the FMCG marketing channel.

H4. Commitment is positively associated with the use of social enforcement mechanisms in the FMCG marketing channel.

2.3 Mediating effect of commitment in the relationship

Following on from hypotheses *H1*, *H3* and *H4*, we establish a syllogism such that trust acts as contractual enforcement and as social enforcement through the mediation of commitment. The explanation is given because the presence of trust in interorganizational relationships promotes:

- working together to preserve the investment made in the relationship;
- discarding short-term alternatives in favour of expected long-term benefits; and
- avoiding the risks of opportunistic actions that endanger channel member networks (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ponder *et al.*, 2016; Watson *et al.*, 2015).

This situation obliges the parties to comply with what has been agreed in the contract (Sharma *et al.*, 2015) and also exerts social pressure to comply with the trust placed in the exchange partner (Ferro *et al.*, 2016). We thus propose the following hypotheses:

H5. Trust is indirectly and positively associated with the use of contractual enforcement through commitment.

H6. Trust is indirectly and positively associated with the use of social enforcement through commitment.

As a consequence of hypotheses *H2*, *H3* and *H4*, we also establish a syllogism such that dependence acts as contractual enforcement and as social enforcement through the mediation of commitment. Dependence is itself a contract that obliges the parties to cooperate (Andaleeb, 1995), explains organizational or interpersonal behaviours in a contract-like manner, and therefore acts as contractual enforcement (Andaleeb, 1996; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Dependence implies a strong obligation that binds more than the affective relationship (Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Sharma *et al.*, 2015). Dependence also has an affective dimension that involves social implications between the parties as well as acceptance and psychological support (Macneil, 1980; Suh *et al.*, 2019). In this case, it assumes the role of social enforcement (Gilliland and Bello, 2002). As a result, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H7. Dependence is indirectly and positively associated with the use of contractual enforcement through commitment.

H8. Dependence is indirectly and positively associated with the use of social enforcement through commitment.

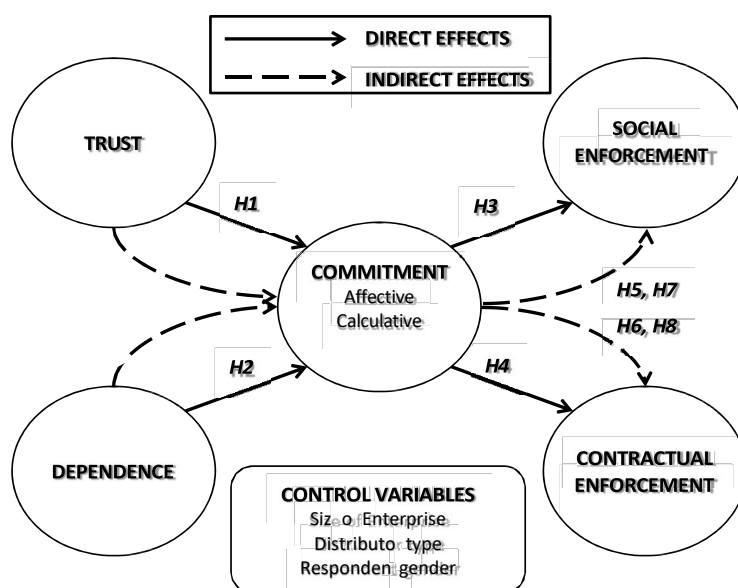
The following Figure 1 shows the model resulting from formulating the hypotheses.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

The context of the study is Spain, a market where retailers have increasingly gained power, particularly by successfully

Figure 1 Proposed hypotheses



Source: Authors' own work

developing their own brands (Derqui *et al.*, 2022). However, despite the changes experienced in the sector and the plethora of competitors fighting for survival (Flowers *et al.*, 2013), channel relationships remain crucial for governance and business success. Given this environment, studying trust, dependence and commitment in buyer-supplier relationships provides valuable insights into how firms navigate these dynamics.

This study is firmly situated within a B2B context, as it investigates inter-organisational relationships between firms, specifically, between FMCG suppliers and distributors. The sample comprises purchasing managers from wholesale and retail firms, individuals who are professionally responsible for managing procurement and maintaining supplier relationships. These managers operate in environments marked by negotiated contracts, long-term dependencies and relational investments, hallmarks of B2B markets (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The use of LinkedIn as a professional platform to reach qualified respondents further strengthens the B2B relevance of the sample, ensuring that participants possess direct and substantial experience with supplier governance. By focusing on procurement decision-makers in a channel-intensive industry, the study captures the essence of B2B dynamics, where trust, commitment and enforcement mechanisms play a critical role in coordinating joint activities and shaping performance outcomes across firm boundaries.

The sample was obtained through an online survey with a self-administered questionnaire. Key respondents were purchasing managers of FMCG – both wholesalers and retailers. Before sending the questionnaire, a pre-test was carried out with eight purchasing managers, who were asked for their opinion on the clarity of the questions and for any suggestions they might have. Data were collected through the professional social network LinkedIn. We consider it a novel and useful method for business research, as LinkedIn has become an invaluable data source to link to survey data for research on economic, employment and social network topics that has the potential to address novel research questions and improve data quality (Al Baghal *et al.*, 2024). LinkedIn is a platform that connects professionals in various fields and, therefore, provides greater ability to target data collection to the appropriate social network or, in this case, specific industry (Dusek *et al.*, 2015).

In this network, a rigorous analysis was conducted on the profiles of potential respondents, selecting those with purchasing and procurement responsibility in wholesale and retail FMCG distribution, who were well-positioned to have a deep understanding of the business and channel relationships with their suppliers. After obtaining their contact information, they were invited to complete an online questionnaire addressing the status of these relationships and how they exercised control over them, both from a contractual and social perspective. Of the 1,500 questionnaires that were sent out, 204 with valid data were obtained, giving a ratio of 13.60%. Before data processing, we conducted an ANOVA test using the response phase criterion. The absence of any significant differences suggested a low likelihood of non-response bias (Armstrong and Overton, 1977).

3.2 Measurement scales

Commitment: The academic literature on interorganizational relationships shows us a complex and multicomponent construct consisting of two different forms of attachment – calculative commitment and loyalty commitment (Gilliland and Bello, 2002). The commitment in an exchange relationship is a second-order formative construct measured through two first-order reflective constructs: affective commitment (AFF_COM) and calculative commitment (CAL_COM). To measure these, we use a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) based on measures from relationship literature that have demonstrated their effectiveness.

Affective commitment (Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Sharma *et al.*, 2015):

- 1 our firm believes this supplier is doing the right thing by us;
- 2 we have positive feelings towards this supplier;
- 3 our loyalty to this supplier is the major reason why we continue to work with them;
- 4 we want to stay associated with this supplier because of our allegiance to them; and
- 5 we intend to continue working with this supplier because we feel them to be “part of the family”.

Calculative commitment (Du and Zhang, 2017; Sharma *et al.*, 2015):

- 1 all things considered, we actually have no alternative to this relationship;
- 2 it would be very difficult for us to find a replacement for this supplier;
- 3 changing from this supplier to another would cost us too much;
- 4 we want to keep the relationship with this supplier because it is difficult to find similar suppliers; and
- 5 we need to keep the relationship with this supplier because ending the relationship will bring heavy losses.

Source: Authors’ own work

Trust is a construct that defines an exchange relationship situation of both an affective and an economic nature. The concept is well established in marketing channel research (Andaleeb, 1995; Ferro *et al.*, 2016; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sharma, 2020; Suh *et al.*, 2019). A Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) was used for measurement.

Trust (Sharma, 2020; Suh *et al.*, 2019):

- 1 we feel we can trust this supplier completely;
- 2 we have full confidence in the information provided to us by this supplier;
- 3 we have complete confidence in this supplier’s motives;
- 4 the supplier keeps the promises it makes to our firms; and
- 5 when it comes to things that are important to us, we can depend on the supplier’s support.

Source: Authors’ own work

Dependence is regarded by researchers as a base for explaining marketing channel relationships (Andaleeb, 1995). It is a concept that establishes the relationship based on its functionality (J. C. Anderson and Narus, 1990). To measure it, we use a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Dependence (Cai *et al.*, 2017; Du and Zhang, 2017; Vázquez-Casielles *et al.*, 2017):

- 1 our company is quite dependent on this supplier;
- 2 if this relationship ended, our company would face a significant loss;
- 3 the supplier provides vital resources that our company would find difficult to obtain elsewhere;
- 4 it would be very difficult to replace the sales and profits generated by this manufacturer's products; and
- 5 if our relationship with the manufacturer were discontinued, it would be difficult for us to find an alternative supplier.

Source: Authors' own work

Contractual and social enforcement. Contractual enforcement is a system of obligations of a contractual nature, whereas social enforcement is an obligation deriving from the relationship (Sharma *et al.*, 2015). In both types of enforcement, the relationship is present. In the case of enforcement that is contractual in origin, it is the contract that sets out the obligations, as not everything might be contemplated (Macneil, 1980). In social enforcement, however, obligations arise from the relationship (Sharma *et al.*, 2015). To measure the two concepts, we use a scale developed by Gilliland and Bello (2002) based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Contractual enforcement (Gilliland and Bello, 2002):

- 1 where there is one, we rely on our agreement to resolve disagreements with this distributor;
- 2 we remind them of any obligations stipulated in our agreement; and
- 3 we refer to portions of our agreement when seeking to gain their compliance on a particular request.

Social enforcement (Gilliland and Bello, 2002)

- 1 we will keep our promises to each other because we value our partnership;
- 2 the strength of our relationship will keep the parties honest when dealing with each other; and
- 3 both sides are willing to make cooperative changes when differences arise.

Source: Authors' own work

3.3 Statistical procedure

As established earlier, the proposed model consists of six variables (LOC) established in Mode A (reflective), two of which – AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT and CALCULATIVE COMMITMENT – form COMMITMENT (HOC) established in Mode B (formative). The constructs have been considered composites based on how the survey was defined and, therefore, on the relationship between the variables and their indicators (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2016). First-order constructs have been considered Mode A due to the high correlation between the indicators of which they are comprised (Rigdon, 2016). The second-order construct has been considered Mode B since the two first-order constructs that comprise it represent different underlying dimensions that help to create this higher-order construct (Hair *et al.*, 2020).

This research adopts a confirmatory, explanatory and predictive approach, as stated by Cepeda-Carrion *et al.* (2019). Based on the proposed model with composites in Mode A and Mode B, the various direct and indirect relationships

established in the model, the technique considered most appropriate for analysis is PLS-SEM (Hair *et al.*, 2022). To examine the hypotheses, bootstrapping was performed using 10,000 samples, as outlined by Streukens and Leroi-Werelds (Streukens and Leroi-Werelds, 2016). On the other hand, NCA is included to identify factors that are not only associated with an increased probability of a given outcome but are also necessary conditions for its occurrence (Dul, 2016). Unlike PLS-SEM, which analyses relationships in terms of probability and correlation, NCA examines the necessity of certain variable levels for a condition to materialize. That is, while PLS-SEM is needed to identify the should-have factors, that is, the factors that increase the level of the outcome, NCA indicates the must-have factors, that is, the factors critical for the outcome (Cassia and Magno, 2024). This complements the analysis by providing an additional perspective on which factors are indispensable in the governance of the FMCG distribution channel.

4. Results

To analyse the proposed model, we begin by studying the measurement model for the first and second-order variables. The structural model is then analysed to either accept or reject the proposed hypotheses, which includes examining the established mediations. A necessary conditions analysis is then performed to determine which variables are critical in terms of achieving a desired minimum level in the two proposed endogenous variables. Finally, an analysis of the predictive capacity of the model is conducted.

4.1 Measurement model analysis

To analyse the validity and reliability of the items and constructs, it is important to consider that the first-order variables (lower-order constructs) have been treated as Mode A composites. An analysis is therefore conducted using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, the Dijkstra–Henseler rho ratio and the average variance extracted (AVE). Additionally, compliance with the Fornell–Larcker criterion and verification of Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio values are assessed. For the second-order construct (higher-order construct) – treated as a Mode B composite – the size and significance of its weights are examined. The variance inflation factor (VIF) is also tested. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

The results from Table 1 demonstrate that the first-order constructs exhibit substantial factor loadings, surpassing the minimum threshold of 0.7 and thereby indicating good convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, the values of Cronbach's alpha, ρ_A and ρ_C are above the recommended threshold of 0.7, suggesting good internal reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2022). Finally, the AVE values are also satisfactory and exceed the threshold of 0.5, thus indicating good measure convergence (J. F. Hair *et al.*, 2019). As regards the second-order constructs, the weights are significant, suggesting that these constructs are well defined by their first-order components. Additionally, the VIF is below three, indicating there are no issues of multicollinearity among the predictors. The results obtained thus demonstrate that the measures used in the study display good convergent validity and reliability, both at first-order and second-order construct levels.

Lower-order constructs	Mean	SD	Loading	t-student*	α	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
Calculative commitment					0.945	0.949	0.958	0.822
CAL_COM1	3.438	1.852	0.845	24.358				
CAL_COM2	3.627	1.774	0.929	78.869				
CAL_COM3	3.824	1.846	0.934	92.025				
CAL_COM4	3.926	1.200	0.911	54.014				
CAL_COM5	3.665	1.554	0.909	46.893				
Contractual enforcement					0.741	0.872	0.821	0.605
CON_ENF1	5.545	1.200	0.848	21.102				
CON_ENF2	4.759	1.554	0.723	8.039				
CON_ENF3	4.668	1.597	0.757	9.153				
Dependence					0.918	0.921	0.939	0.754
DEPE_1	4.300	1.490	0.780	23.365				
DEPE_2	3.970	1.740	0.918	78.071				
DEPE_3	3.794	1.803	0.892	36.913				
DEPE_4	3.897	1.676	0.904	57.706				
DEPE_5	3.716	1.809	0.842	30.466				
Affective commitment					0.891	0.910	0.918	0.690
AFF_COM1	5.162	1.256	0.832	40.134				
AFF_COM2	5.417	1.212	0.857	55.924				
AFF_COM3	4.917	1.478	0.827	24.002				
AFF_COM4	4.824	1.471	0.854	32.339				
AFF_COM5	4.455	1.715	0.783	22.781				
Social enforcement					0.841	0.854	0.905	0.761
SOC_ENF1	5.564	1.343	0.893	39.500				
SOC_ENF2	5.537	1.333	0.934	73.338				
SOC_ENF3	5.213	1.375	0.784	14.243				
TRUST					0.936	0.939	0.952	0.798
TRUS_1	5.338	1.298	0.930	83.628				
TRUS_2	5.404	1.334	0.916	57.927				
TRUS_3	5.182	1.376	0.914	65.906				
TRUS_4	5.588	1.211	0.856	38.727				
TRUS_5	5.696	1.195	0.846	28.193				
High-order constructs			Weights	t-student*	VIF			
Commitment								
Calculative commitment			0.235	2.642	1.065			
Affective commitment				19.063	1.065			

Note(s): α : Cronbach's alpha; ρ_A : Dijkstra-Henseler's composite reliability; ρ_C : Jöreskog's composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted; VIF: variance inflation factor

Source(s): Authors' own work

The subsequent phase of the measurement model analysis involved assessing discriminant validity using the Fornell–Larcker criterion introduced by Fornell and Larcker (1981). As per this criterion, the correlations between each pair of variables should not surpass the square root of the AVE of each variable. Table 2 illustrates that the variables in the model adhere to the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Furthermore, we validated discriminant validity by ensuring that all HTMT ratio values remained below the recommended thresholds of 0.85 – as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2019) – thereby confirming discriminant validity.

To conclude the analysis of the external model, it has been confirmed for both the estimated and saturated models that the

standardized root mean square residual values remain below the specified threshold of 0.08. Likewise, it has been ensured that the normed fit index exceeds 0.9. These findings confirm a satisfactory model fit (Henseler *et al.*, 2014; Hu and Bentler, 1998).

4.2 Structural model analysis

To initiate the analysis of the structural model, it was ensured that the VIF between the constructs does not surpass the threshold of 3. As evident from the findings presented in Table 3, the VIF value falls significantly below 3 (Hair *et al.*, 2019), thereby eliminating concerns regarding collinearity issues.

Table 2 Convergent validity and reliability of measures

LOW	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
I CALCULATIVE COMMITMENT	0.906	0.278	0.844	0.278	0.237	0.117
II CONTRACTUAL ENFORCEMENT	0.246	0.778	0.286	0.577	0.656	0.503
III DEPENDENCE	0.828	0.266	0.868	0.388	0.313	0.228
IV AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT	0.241	0.584	0.340	0.831	0.774	0.770
V SOCIAL ENFORCEMENT	0.212	0.673	0.274	0.696	0.873	0.778
VI TRUST	0.109	0.534	0.209	0.744	0.688	0.893

Note(s): HTMT ratio over the diagonal (italics). Fornell-Larcker criterion: square root of AVE in diagonal (bold) and construct correlations below the diagonal
 Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3 Structural model results

Direct and indirect effects	Path	SD	T-value	f^2	5%	95%	VIF	H	Supported
<i>Direct effects</i>									
Trust ϕ_1 commitment	0.635	0.065	9.801***	1.073	0.521	0.731	1.047	H1	Yes
Dependence ϕ_1 commitment	0.372	0.085	4.357***	0.369	0.230	0.512	1.047	H2	Yes
Commitment ϕ_1 contractual enforcement	0.594	0.041	14.614***	0.545	0.528	0.661	1.000	H3	Yes
Commitment ϕ_1 social enforcement	0.692	0.040	17.131***	0.917	0.622	0.755	1.000	H4	Yes
<i>Indirect Effects</i>									
Trust ϕ_1 commitment ϕ_1 contractual enforcement	0.377	0.054	6.999***		0.288	0.464		H5	Yes
Trust ϕ_1 commitment ϕ_1 social enforcement	0.439	0.062	7.110***		0.334	0.537		H6	Yes
Dependence ϕ_1 commitment ϕ_1 contractual enforcement	0.221	0.048	4.573***		0.139	0.299		H7	Yes
Dependence ϕ_1 commitment ϕ_1 social enforcement	0.257	0.054	4.750***		0.163	0.341		H8	Yes

Note(s): R^2 [95% CI in brackets]: Commitment: 0.638 [0.567; 0.167]; Contractual enforcement: 0.349 [0.275; 0.434]; Social enforcement: 0.638 [0.476; 0.384]; Standardized path values reported; f^2 : size effect index; 95PCI: 95% percentile confidence interval; VIF: Inner model variance inflation factors. Significance, t-student and 90% bias-corrected CIs were performed by a 10,000 repetition bootstrapping procedure; *** $p < 0.001$

Source(s): Authors' own work

The path coefficients' sign, magnitude and statistical significance were then analysed through a one-tailed bootstrapping (10,000 samples). The results allow us to accept all hypotheses – those related to direct effects and those related to indirect effects.

As regards direct effects, the results in Table 3 show that trust has a significant positive effect on commitment ($\beta = 0.635^{***}$), supporting H1. Similarly, the effect of dependence on commitment is significant and positive ($\beta = 0.372^{***}$), supporting H2. In addition, H3 and H4 are also accepted, as in both cases commitment produces a positive and significant effect on contractual enforcement and social enforcement ($\beta = 0.635^{***}$ and $\beta = 0.692^{***}$, respectively).

The indirect effects show how trust significantly and positively affects contractual enforcement and social enforcement through commitment ($\beta = 0.377^{***}$ and $\beta = 0.439^{***}$, respectively), such that H5 and H6 are accepted. The same occurs for dependence, as can be seen in the results. Commitment mediates its relationship with contractual enforcement and social enforcement ($\beta = 0.221^{***}$ and $\beta = 0.257^{***}$, respectively), leading us to accept H7 and H8. With regard to the established control variables, none have a significant effect on the proposed endogenous variable.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) shows us how the model explains 63.8% of the variance in commitment, 34.9% in contractual enforcement and 47.6% in social enforcement.

As stated by Hair *et al.* (2019), all values are moderate, such that the explanatory power of the model is demonstrated. Finally, the influence of each independent variable on the dependent variable's R^2 has been tested by examining the size effect (f^2). According to Cohen (1988), all results (>0.35) show a large effect on the dependent variable's R^2 when each independent variable is included.

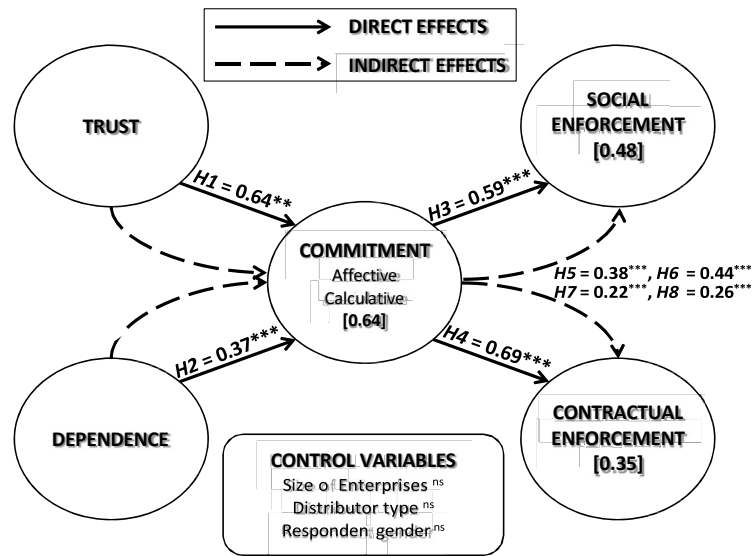
Figure 2 shows the standardized path coefficients and R^2 values. The standardized path coefficients reveal the degree to which the predictor variables influence the variance in the endogenous variables, as per Palos-Sanchez *et al.* (2021). Additionally, the R^2 values for each dependent variable are shown, indicating the percentage of variance accounted for by the predictor variables for that specific dependent variable.

4.3 Necessary conditions analysis

NCA can ascertain whether a specific circumstance is necessary for a particular outcome and can gauge the magnitude of its impact (Dul, 2016). Both CE and CR techniques were chosen to create robustness functions, with the findings being detailed in Table 4.

In NCA, effect size is used, which is entirely different from the size effect (f^2) previously used in PLS-SEM. While f^2 measures the magnitude of the impact of an independent variable on a dependent variable in terms of changes in R^2 , the size effect ranges from zero to one and represents the extent to

Figure 2 Results



Source: Authors' own work

Table 4 NCA size effect

Direct and indirect effects	Social enforcement		Contractual enforcement	
	CR-FDH	CE-FDH	CR-FDH	CE-FDH
Commitment	0.184***	0.206***	0.129***	0.143***
Dependence	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
Trust	0.289***	0.356***	0.240***	0.289***

Note(s): ***p < 0.001, CR-FDH: ceiling regression with a free disposal hull, and CE-FDH: ceiling envelopment with a free disposal hull
Source(s): Authors' own work

which a variable is a necessary condition for the occurrence of another. A value below 0.1 indicates a low level, between 0.1 and 0.3 denotes a moderate level and a value approaching 1 indicates a high level, meaning that without this variable, the desired effect almost cannot occur (Dul *et al.*, 2020). This distinguishes NCA from correlational models, as it focuses on necessity relationships rather than probability-based relationships.

For NCA calculations, the conditions must meet two criteria: the size effect should not fall below 0.1, and the Monte Carlo simulation substitution test results for the size effect must be statistically significant (Vis and Dul, 2018). The results indicate that commitment and trust are important factors with a moderate effect on compliance in both the social and contractual contexts, while dependence has no influence.

A necessary condition serves as a bottleneck, signifying that this condition must be present for the outcome to occur, and the absence of this condition cannot be compensated for by other factors (Dul, 2016). Table 5 presents the bottleneck table encompassing three significant conditions (commitment, dependence and trust) that are crucial for analysing necessary

relationships in degrees. This table thus illustrates the minimum values of commitment, dependence and trust required to attain high social enforcement and contractual enforcement (80% and above). As observed, in the case of social enforcement, the minimum threshold for commitment is 8.82%, as is the case for trust. However, no minimum threshold is necessary for dependence. In the case of contractual enforcement, the minimum threshold for commitment is 4.41%, while for trust it is 7.84%. Similarly, no minimum value is required for dependence.

4.4 Predictive performance analysis

The model's ability to make predictions was evaluated using cross-validation with holdout samples (Shmueli *et al.*, 2019), using the PLS Predict algorithm with SmartPLS (Shmueli *et al.*, 2016). This evaluation method assesses the model's ability to forecast future observations. Predictive validity confirms that a collection of variable measures can anticipate a specific outcome variable (Shmueli *et al.*, 2019).

Initially, a k-fold cross-validation was conducted, with k set to five subgroups to determine the minimum size of $n = 30$ for the holdout sample, as outlined by (2016), and repeated 10 times. Additionally, a PLS predictive analysis was used in the model, as detailed by Calvo-Mora *et al.* (2020).

The results presented in Table 6 indicate that across both individual indicators and overall constructs, all Q^2 values exceed 0. These findings indicate that the model exhibits satisfactory predictive capability, as highlighted by Felipe *et al.* (2017). Moreover, when comparing the RMSE and MAE results of PLS-SEM with those of the linear regression (LM) model, it is evident that PLS-SEM yields a lower prediction error and a higher Q^2 value in the majority of instances. For this reason, it can be stated that the model has a suitable prediction capacity.

Table 5 Bottleneck table (percentages)

Social enforcement (%)	Commitment	Dependence	Trust	Contractual enforcement (%)	Commitment	Dependence	Trust
0	NN	NN	0.49	0	NN	NN	NN
10	NN	NN	0.49	10	NN	NN	NN
20	0.98	NN	0.49	20	NN	NN	0.49
30	1.47	NN	0.49	30	0.49	NN	0.49
40	1.96	NN	0.98	40	1.47	NN	0.49
50	2.94	NN	1.47	50	1.96	NN	0.98
60	4.41	NN	3.43	60	1.96	NN	1.47
70	5.89	NN	6.37	70	3.92	NN	3.43
80	8.82	NN	8.82	80	4.41	NN	7.84
90	12.75	NN	12.74	90	7.35	NN	9.80
100	20.58	NN	15.68	100	9.80	NN	15.69

Note(s): NN means “Not necessary.” The minimum and maximum values of social enforcement and contractual enforcement are 0.05 and 0.95, respectively. The shaded portion indicates contributions of commitment, dependence and trust to obtain at least 80% of social enforcement and contractual enforcement

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 6 PLS predict assessment

Q ²							
<i>Construct prediction summary</i>							
Commitment	0.631						
CON_ENF	0.284						
SOC_ENF	0.428						
		PLS	LM	PLS-LM			
	Q ²	RMSE	MAE	RMSE	MAE	RMSE	MAE
<i>Indicator prediction summary</i>							
CAL_COM	0.201	0.498	0.344	0.584	0.437	-0.086	-0.093
LOY_COM	0.553	0.651	0.521	0.659	0.525	-0.008	-0.004
CON_ENF1	0.317	0.937	0.776	0.948	0.720	-0.010	0.056
CON_ENF2	0.008	1.556	1.298	1.595	1.316	-0.038	-0.018
CON_ENF3	0.062	1.555	1.291	1.597	1.306	-0.042	-0.015
SOC_ENF1	0.323	1.111	0.840	1.147	0.830	-0.036	0.01
SOC_ENF2	0.365	1.068	0.803	1.086	0.772	-0.018	0.031
SOC_ENF3	0.290	1.165	0.888	1.175	0.835	-0.01	0.053

Note(s): PLS: Partial least squares path model; LM: Linear regression model; RMSE: Root mean square error; MAE: Mean absolute error; Q²: PLS-predict index performed with 5 k-fold and 10 repetitions

Source(s): Authors’ own work

4.5 Discussion

The results obtained provide empirical support for the proposed hypotheses. On the one hand, this paper provides empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of relationship governance. The context of the study is Spain, a market where retailers have increasingly gained power, particularly by successfully developing their own brands (Derqui *et al.*, 2022). However, despite the changes experienced in the sector and the plethora of competitors fighting for survival (Flowers *et al.*, 2013), our results show that developing trust between partners is still key to enforcing the relationship. Trust helps commitment to emerge, which in turn determines social and contractual enforcement.

Although dependence seems to play the same role as trust as a direct antecedent of commitment and as an indirect

antecedent of enforcement according to the findings of the structural model, the necessary conditions analysis carried out contradicts this. The necessary conditions analysis is a method that studies phenomena from the perspective of necessity rather than probability (Dul, 2016). A causal factor may not only increase the probability of the outcome but can also be a necessary condition for the outcome, such that without a certain level of the causal factor, the effect will not occur in nearly all cases (Dul, 2024). There is no minimum threshold for dependence –either for social or contractual enforcement. In other words, a high level of social and contractual enforcement can be reached without dependence between the partners. Nevertheless, a high level of social and contractual enforcement cannot be reached without a certain level of trust and commitment between partners. The explanation for this

result is that trust and dependence influence commitment differently (Andaleeb, 1996). In fact, it is well established in the literature that trust is the most relevant element in commitment and therefore in interorganizational relationships (Brown *et al.*, 2019; Du and Zhang, 2017; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Sharma *et al.*, 2015; Suh *et al.*, 2019).

Another surprising result is that trust seems to be even more important than commitment for contractual enforcement. Trust and commitment show a similar threshold for high social enforcement, although trust almost doubles the threshold of commitment in terms of attaining high contractual enforcement. In a transaction-based channel as the FMCG sector, one would expect more influence of the belief that the relationship between companies worth the maximum efforts at maintaining it -commitment-, on the coordination efforts to align promises and actions -contractual enforcement-. At the same time, the belief in the trustworthiness and integrity of the business partners -trust- seems to make less necessary this constant unilateral support in the contractual arrangements -contractual enforcement-. However, our results point out the opposite. It may be that in such a competitive and changing world, having found a partner to rely on puts even more pressure on companies to keep it. And so they turn to contractual enforcement to make sure they are still on the same page.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Academic implications

This paper helps to empirically extend and validate the Commitment–Trust theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and Relational Norms theory (Macneil, 1980) by examining how trust, commitment, dependence and enforcement function in what is an overlooked economic sector – the FMCG industry. These theories, often tested in long-term, relational or high-involvement contexts, are shown here to be applicable in high-velocity, transactional environments such as FMCG channels, which is characterized by being one of the most volatile sectors in which to operate (Flowers *et al.*, 2013), by its competitive dynamics and by its constant need for operational optimization (Weaven *et al.*, 2021).

The FMCG sector continues to rely heavily on traditional interorganizational governance, as e-commerce has not achieved significant penetration in this domain – unlike consumer technology, industrial goods and textiles – highlighting the strategic relevance of dyadic channel relationships and informal coordination mechanisms (Vyshak *et al.*, 2023).

Although we found no direct evidence in the literature regarding the applicability of interorganizational governance theories in FMCG distribution, our results empirically prove that trust, dependence and commitment remain central constructs for understanding governance effectiveness. Trust emerges not only as a key antecedent of commitment but also as a necessary condition for its development and for the activation of enforcement mechanisms, especially in contexts where formal safeguards are limited. Dependence, while influential, appears to play a more contingent role, suggesting that its effect may be moderated or substituted by other relational factors.

In this regard, our study introduces a novel theoretical lens by analyzing the FMCG distribution channel through the perspective of Commitment–Trust Theory and Relational Norms Theory. Traditionally, the efficiency of this channel has been conceptualized through transactional logics, relying on contractual governance mechanisms and the bargaining power of each party. However, our findings suggest that the development of strong, long-term relationships complements formal contracts by reinforcing governance structures and reducing vulnerability to opportunistic behaviors. This reframing highlights the potential for more robust and resilient forms of coordination in highly competitive environments such as FMCG.

With these results, we offer an original theoretical perspective on FMCG distribution channel strategy, which has traditionally been dominated by transaction-cost and agency-based efficiency logics (Rindfleisch, 2020; Watson *et al.*, 2015), often neglecting the social and psychological dimensions of interfirm collaboration.

All conclusions are drawn from a relevant sample of real companies that includes both retailers and wholesalers. The methodology used to collect information through LinkedIn contacts is also novel and opens the door to quantitative research that aligns more closely to the real interest of practitioners. This method enables researchers to reach key decision-makers more effectively, improving both response quality and practical relevance. This approach also provides greater privacy for sensitive topics, enhances access to the survey, reduces data collection costs and allows reaching traditionally hard-to-access populations. However, it requires significant time investment in relationship-building and careful design to ensure rigor (Dusek *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the type of analysis used to study the data – NCA. This new method, which examines the relationships between variables not in terms of probability but in terms of necessity, allows us to adopt a new and refreshing perspective when exploring channel relationships. Thus, well-established assumptions, such as the influence of dependence on commitment and enforcement, are overturned, and new questions arise that will need to be addressed in future studies.

5.2 Managerial implications

Promoting trust and commitment is a critical aspect of effective business management, particularly in the FMCG sector, which has shown little effectiveness when focusing primarily on transactional decisions aimed at short-term economic efficiency (Mahama-Musah *et al.*, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2019). Given the intense competition and the structural volatility of FMCG markets (Flowers *et al.*, 2013), firms must develop new tactics to increase their chances of success. An efficient supply chain can offer more opportunities for starting out and for remaining successful by extending the time horizon of relationships and by investing in building trust and commitment.

Our findings suggest that trust and dependence do not equally generate all forms of commitment, and that affective and calculative commitment are associated with different governance strategies. Specifically, affective commitment is more strongly linked to social enforcement mechanisms, such as informal agreements, mutual expectations, or personal trust. Calculative commitment, by contrast, is more related to

contractual enforcement, including formal controls, performance clauses and penalty systems.

This distinction offers actionable guidance for channel managers. In contexts where interpersonal trust is feasible (e.g. repeated exchanges, small networks), investing in relationship-building activities – such as cross-training, continuity of personnel, or collaborative routines – can reduce the need for rigid contract structures and lower governance costs. In contrast, in low-trust or high-risk environments, such as new partnerships or markets with frequent opportunistic behavior, managers may need to rely more on formal contracts and monitoring systems to safeguard performance and reduce relational uncertainty.

The governance mechanisms identified in our study may also apply differently depending on the distributor type. For wholesalers, who handle bulk purchases and coordinate multiple downstream actors, building trust and long-term commitment with suppliers is essential to ensure a stable supply and leverage scale efficiencies. Retailers, on the other hand, often operate with tighter margins and shorter planning horizons, making contractual enforcement mechanisms more relevant to manage inventory, logistics and rapid demand shifts. These differences indicate that managers should tailor their governance strategies to their position within the distribution channel and their specific risk profiles.

While this study focuses on the FMCG distribution channel, the findings offer valuable managerial insights for B2B practitioners in broader sectors such as industrial manufacturing, logistics, technology and business services contexts where formal contracts often coexist with informal, relational governance. The empirical evidence that trust and commitment are necessary conditions for effective enforcement mechanisms underscores the need for managers to go beyond transactional safeguards and invest in relational capital. In long-term interorganisational partnerships such as strategic alliances, supplier collaborations, or key account relationships, trust-building and affective commitment can serve as informal control mechanisms that mitigate opportunism and foster cooperation. This insight is especially relevant in high-uncertainty environments, where contractual completeness is impossible. Therefore, managers responsible for supplier relationship management, key account management or alliance governance can leverage these findings to strengthen compliance, reduce monitoring costs and enhance relational continuity across sectors.

Finally, emerging technologies such as blockchain offer promising tools to enhance transparency, trust and accountability in channel relationships. Although still in early stages of adoption, blockchain can increase the perceived integrity and immutability of shared data, reinforcing commitment by demonstrating procedural fairness and reliability. Its standardization could thus become a structural enabler of trust-based governance in the FMCG sector.

5.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

Our model explains 63.8% of the variance in commitment, 47.6% in social enforcement but just 34.9% in contractual enforcement. This lower explanatory power in contractual enforcement might be due to the absence of an important variable or relationship in our model. Future studies should

take this into account and approach this specific type of enforcement from a more exploratory perspective.

The results concerning the non-existence of a minimum threshold for dependence in any of the types of enforcement raise several future research questions. Has dependence lost influence in the relationship governance of the supply chain? Are these results due to the particularities of the sector or the country analysed in this paper? To address these issues, future research should revise recent published works through the lens of the NCA to ascertain whether dependence is a causal factor or a necessary condition to commit and enforce channel relationships in other contexts and with other samples.

While our study focuses on the Spanish FMCG market, it is worth noting that governance mechanisms might differ in markets with distinct regulatory environments, competitive structures, or retailer power dynamics. For instance, in markets where large retail chains dominate (e.g. the UK or Germany), contractual enforcement may be more prevalent, whereas in fragmented markets (e.g. Southern Europe), relationship-based governance might play a more significant role. Future studies could explore these variations to refine managerial recommendations further. Following the qualitative work of Derqui *et al.* (2022), we highlight that this study focuses on Spain, such that the particularities involved mean that the results cannot be fully extrapolated. It would therefore be interesting for future studies to look at other countries.

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NOTA IMPORTANTE

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