

# Interfirm influence strategies in marketing channels

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## Abstract

This paper is designed to address the differences among competitors in the use of interfirm influence strategies, trying to discover tendencies in the use of each strategy, ranking the use of the different influence strategies and identifying the type of strategy used by each manufacturer.

Data were gained by a mail survey of the major computer manufacturers in Spain. Empirical research has been undertaken in order to build the constructs 'coercive influence' and 'noncoercive influence', and they are ranked by level of use. Causal analysis is used to provide such analysis. Type of influence strategy adopted by suppliers is analysed. Grouping of computer manufacturers according to the type of influence strategy adopted is also provided.

## Keywords

Channel relationships, influence, computer sector, Spain.

## Introduction

Firms have to manage channel relationships because they have to satisfy not only the requirements of end users of their products, but also the requirements of other firms involved in marketing these products, i.e. distributors. High levels of satisfaction are likely to result in more favourable performance outcomes.

The need for firms to manage channel relationships has been a major theme in the channels literature for many years. In particular, a large body of research conducted during the last two decades has increased our understanding of vertical power relationships in the distribution channel.<sup>1</sup> More recently, attention has been drawn to interfirm influence strategies,

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distinguishing between the mere possession of power and the use of power bases, that is, influence strategies (Frazier and Summers 1984). Roering (1977), Wilkinson and Kipnis (1978), Dwyer and Walker (1981), Frazier and Summers (1984, 1986), Kale (1986), Frazier, Gill and Kale (1989), Keith, Jackson and Crosby (1990), Frazier and Rody (1991), Scheer and Stern (1992) and Boyle *et al.* (1992) have conducted empirical studies that have been centred on or have referred to influence strategies in channel relationships. Scheer and Stern (1992) have focused on contingency conceptualization of the exercise of influence. Other works, such as Hunt and Nevin (1974), Lusch (1977), Wilkinson (1979) or Gaski and Nevin (1985), have investigated 'exercised coercive and non-coercive sources of power', but none of their studies explicitly considered the use of influence strategies.

Despite this research effort, no work has addressed the differences among competitors in the use of interfirm influence strategies. So, the research reported here was designed to provide additional evidence concerning influence strategies, trying to address tendencies in the use of each strategy and identify the type of strategy used by each manufacturer in the computer industry.

The purpose of this research is to expand our understanding of type of interfirm influence strategies considering that firms are working in a very competitive environment. Our objective is twofold: on the one hand, to rank the use of the different influence strategies to find out which strategies are preferred; on the other, to analyse which strategies are used by each supplier.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Conceptual frameworks*

Influence strategies (use of power) are a key construct of channel relationships. The political economy approach (Stern and Reve 1980; Arndt 1983) views a social system as comprising interacting sets of major economic and socio-political forces which affect collective behaviour and performance. The internal polity of the political economy framework is defined by the structure of the channel exchange relationships and the processes of control and influence among channel members.

The marketing and purchasing of industry goods is seen as an interaction process between two parties (Håkansson 1982). The interaction between two channel members affects and is affected by the atmosphere of the relationship, described in terms of the power-dependence relationship. These relationships are embedded in a business-networks context with a complex set of connected relations (Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 1994).

It is important to realize that firms switch the way they use power in exchanges due to factors such as competence or the relational structure. Effective co-ordination and maintenance of interorganizational exchange in distribution channels are very important to distribution-channel management. In this context, interfirm influence processes are of extreme importance. Attitudes and behaviour processes are applicable in this context, having a key role in facilitating the interfirm influence processes (Frazier and Sheth 1985). But exchange relationships are complex and much research is needed to develop successful channel management. As Dwyer, Schurr and Oh pointed out, 'the limited focus of past research (on power, personal relations) reflects less than full consideration of the properties of exchange' (1987: 14).

In domesticated markets, exchange tends to be conducted in a relational exchange framework (Dwyer *et al.* 1987). Anticipated conflicts of interest and future troubles are counterbalanced by trust and joint efforts. Increased interdependence raises the importance of judicious application of power in the exchange. Relationships are based on the confidence of a lasting affiliation and willingness to make sacrifices to develop the alliance (Macneil 1980).

### *Interfirm influence strategies*

Interfirm influence strategies involve the alternative means of communication available to a firm's personnel in their influence attempts with associated channel members (Frazier and Rody 1991). These means of communication within channel dyads have been regarded as the use of power (Frazier and Summers 1984) and 'the glue which holds together a channel' (Mohr and Nevin 1990: 36). Influence attempts take place in the implementation process, according to Frazier's framework of inter-organizational exchange behaviour (Frazier 1983).

Depending on whether the influencer tries to effect some modification of the target firm's behaviour or not, Frazier and Summers (1984) distinguish among strategies based on altering perceptions and strategies not based on perceptual change. The first category includes information exchange (source firm uses discussions on general business issues and operating procedures to try to alter the target's general perceptions of how to operate) and recommendations (source firm predicts that the target firm will be more profitable if the target follows the source's suggestions). The second group is composed of promises (the source pledges to provide the target with a specified reward contingent on the target's compliance with the source's stated desires); threats (the source communicates to the target that failure to perform will result in negative actions); legalistic pleas (source contends that target compliance is required by formal legal contract and/or informal binding agreements between the parties); request

(the source merely informs the target of the action(s) it would like the target to take without mentioning any specific consequences of the target's subsequent compliance or noncompliance).

These strategies can be categorized into two groups: noncoercive influence strategies (information exchange, request and recommendations) and coercive influence strategies (promises, threats and legalistic pleas). Both types of influence strategies interact simultaneously with satisfaction.

When a target firm (i.e. retailer) perceives that the source firm controls its behaviour, the former is less satisfied with the channel relationship than when it perceives that its behaviour is not controlled (Keith *et al.* 1990). This statement is partially supported by Gaski and Nevin (1985). However, it would be interesting to analyse preference in use of influence strategies and the differences among suppliers in the use of influence strategies.

## **Research methodology**

### *Study setting*

The computer sales sector in Spain was the setting for the empirical study. Dwyer *et al.* (1987) suggest that high switching costs give rise to increased interest in maintaining a quality relationship. Products such as computers or high-technology instruments usually present this kind of cost. So, relationships among the major manufacturers of computers and their retailers were examined. The group of manufacturers selected on a turnover basis is the following: IBM, Hewlett Packard, Fujitsu, Olivetti, Inves and Apple. These companies and their retailers make up administered systems where manufacturers have a channelwide perspective and power to organize at least some of the channel's resources.

The computer market is a very dynamic industry where companies survive by competing in a global marketplace, not simply in their domestic market. This industry is made up of multinationals, competition is high and growing from day to day. Manufacturers and distributors sustain an exchange relation based on a closed and planned association to cope with competition.

### *Data collection procedure*

The list of retailers was prepared through the yellow pages, a national representative computer panel and promotional material of the six brands. Collectively, a list of 305 retailers all around the country was assembled, but only 262 of these proved to deal directly with manufacturers. The

initial mailing of the questionnaire was preceded by a letter introducing the project and soliciting the distributor's co-operation. Most of these dealers carried more than one brand. To secure dealers where no firm was represented more than once and to obtain a diverse group of dealers (one by each brand), they were asked in the questionnaire to report on their most important supplier among the seven specified. A total of fifty-five valid questionnaires were returned, representing a 21 per cent response rate.

While Phillips (1981) emphasizes the desirability of utilizing multiple respondents within an organization when using the key information method, he also notes the necessity of verifying that all such respondents are qualified to provide the information requested. In this study, prestudy interviews indicated that only the owner or manager is so qualified. As a result, the questionnaire was mailed to the owner in each dealership.

Finally, we ensured ability to communicate effectively by pretesting the research questionnaire. No particular problems were found.

#### *Operational measures*

The retailer's perception of the degree to which the manufacturer used noncoercive influence strategies was measured by three items, each corresponding to each type of noncoercive strategy. Distributors were asked the extent to which they disagreed or agreed (on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) that they used each strategy. To measure the use of information exchange<sup>2</sup> distributors responded to this statement: '*Our major supplier provides us with information on market conditions and/or business strategy*'. To measure request strategy we offered distributors this item: '*Our major supplier asks us compliance to their request without mentioning the effects it will have on our business*'. Recommendation strategy was measured but distributors responding to this statement: '*We follow manufacturer's recommendations and business suggestions*'.

In measuring retailers' perception of the degree to which manufacturers used coercive influence strategies, we also used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. To measure the use of promises, distributors responded to this statement: '*Our major supplier offers us incentives if we comply with his request*'. Threat strategy was measured by distributors responding to this statement: '*Our major supplier threatens to reduce or not provide us any more assistance*'. To measuring legalistic pleas strategy we offered distributors this item: '*Our major supplier influences our marketing policy by making a point of referring to any legal agreements we have*'.

To verify unidimensionality of measures, coefficient alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and exploratory factor analysis were carried out in the raw data (Churchill

**Table 1** Rotated factor loadings of exploratory factor analysis

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Loadings</i>	
	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>
Information exchange ( $V_1$ )	.74185	.40310
Request ( $V_2$ )	.84234	-.17948
Recommendations ( $V_3$ )	.68981	.48103
Promises ( $V_4$ )	-.04574	.81625
Threats ( $V_5$ )	.14107	.69634
Legalistic ( $V_6$ )	.411541	.66660
Variance explained	46.6% + 19.3% = 65.9%	

1979). The set of items was subjected to exploratory factor analysis, obtaining two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 (eigenvalue<sub>F1</sub> = 2.79468 and eigenvalue<sub>F2</sub> = 1.15718). The rotated factor matrix (varimax rotation) is shown in Table 1.

All the items load fairly high to support the unidimensionality of the constructs. The interpretation of the factor matrix is obvious. Variables  $V_1$ ,  $V_2$  and  $V_3$  load significantly of factor 1, and variables  $V_4$ ,  $V_5$  and  $V_6$  load significantly on factor 2. So, we can name factor 1 as 'Noncoercive influence strategies' and factor 2 'Coercive influence strategies'.

Cronbach's alpha values for the resulting subscales 'Noncoercive influence strategies' and 'Coercive influence strategies' are .74 and .67, respectively. Overall results are acceptable according to Peterson's recommendations (Peterson 1994).

## Analysis and results

### *Ranking use of influence strategies*

We proceeded to rank the use of the different types of coercive as well as noncoercive strategies. In order to do so, the entire set of items was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis to verify unidimensionality and estimate the degree of presence of each strategy in exchange relationship. We estimated this measurement model by maximum likelihood using EQS 5.1 (Bentler 1995). The model was built following the scheme proposed by Hair *et al.* (1992). The objective of this analysis is to find a set of values for the model's parameters that minimizes the difference between the actual covariation among the observed variables and the implied covariation based on the conceptual model. Figure 1 illustrates the complete model.

### *Evaluating the model*

It is recommended that multiple criteria be used to evaluate the fit of the model (Bollen 1989). First, the *overall model fit* was evaluated. The overall

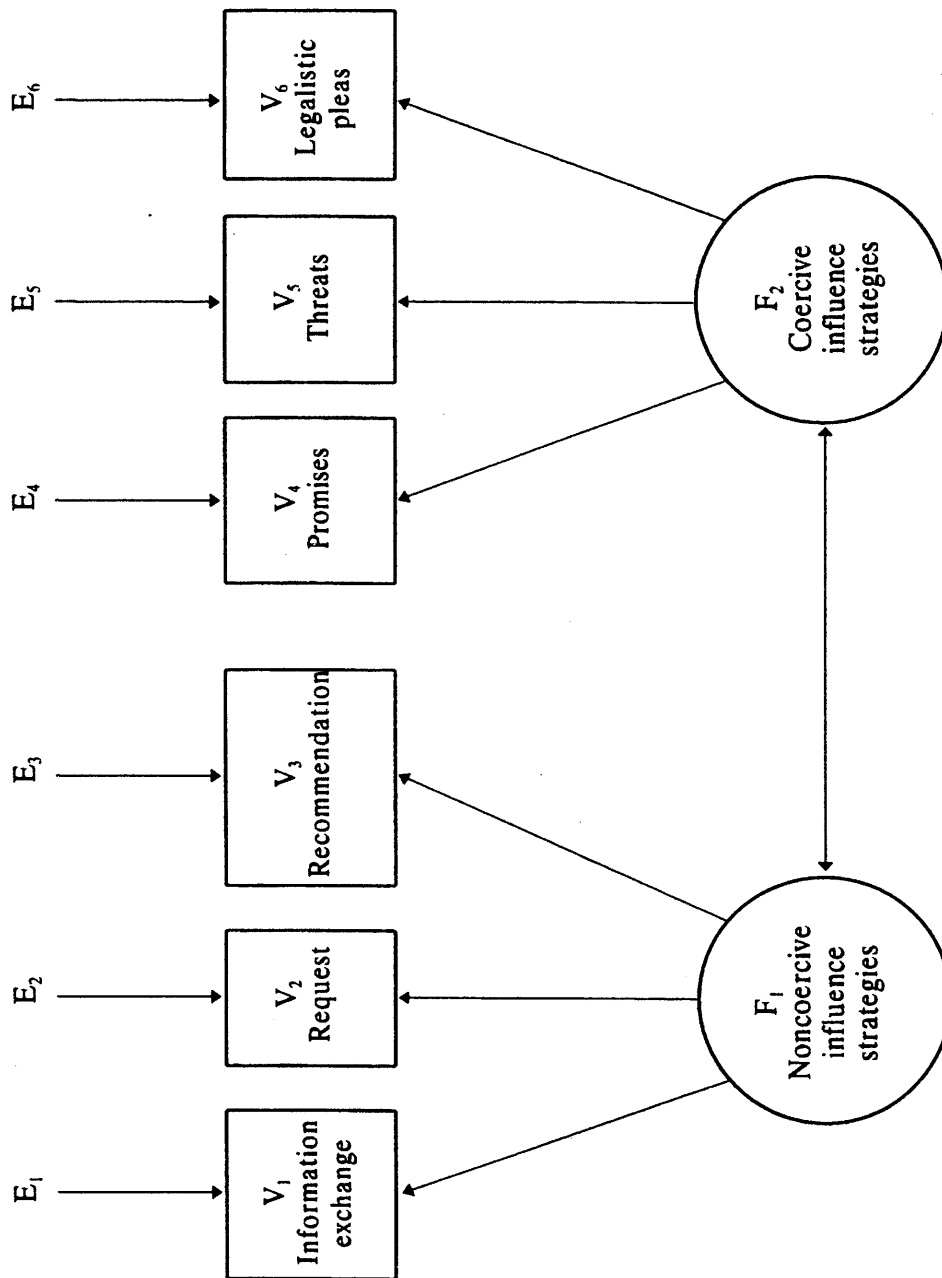


Figure 1 Confirmatory factor analysis model of influence strategies

chi square statistic for the model is adequate, ( $\chi^2(8) = 10.168, p = .25344$ ). Also, the comparative fit index (CFI = .976) and the average off-diagonal standardized residuals (AOSR = .045) show acceptable values to confirm the hypothesized model. An examination of the measurement estimates indicates that multiple indicators have been used for each construct. So *composite reliabilities* ( $\rho_{(\eta)}$ ) were computed in order to assess reliability (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Composite reliabilities of noncoercive influence and coercive influence are .76 and .69, respectively, reaching an acceptable level.

*Content validity* was established by the steps taken in developing the questionnaire items. Construct measures were based on previous measures reported in the literature, in particular, the measures of influence strategies developed by Frazier and Summers (1986). Also, such measures were subjected to pretesting by practitioners. *Convergent validity* was assessed by examining the significance of each estimated loadings. For all indicators the *t*-values for the constructs 'noncoercive influence strategies' and 'coercive influence strategies' exceeded the critical value for the .01 significant level (see Table 2). *Discriminant validity* is also indicated because correlation between both constructs (.38) is smaller than its alpha coefficient. In addition, that correlation is significantly different from 1.0.

### *Results*

Table 2 contains the parameters of the confirmatory factor model for the six strategies. According to the estimates of the different strategies and the inferential estimation through the significant values of the factor loadings, shown in Table 2, ranking can be seen in Figure 2.

#### *Type of influence strategy adopted by suppliers*

In order to find out if there are differences amongst suppliers, a Chaid analysis was performed. Chaid analysis divides a population into subgroups using a dependent variable as a criterion (Magidson 1993). Chaid

**Table 2** Parameters of confirmatory factor model for the influence strategies

<i>Ranking</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Factor loadings (standardized)</i>	<i>Test-t (p &lt; .01)</i>
1	V <sub>3</sub> Recommendation	.879	6.982
2	V <sub>1</sub> Information exchange	.846	6.670
3	V <sub>6</sub> Legalistic pleas	.827	5.691
4	V <sub>5</sub> Threats	.589	4.077
5	V <sub>4</sub> Promises	.524	3.597
6	V <sub>2</sub> Request	.393	2.803



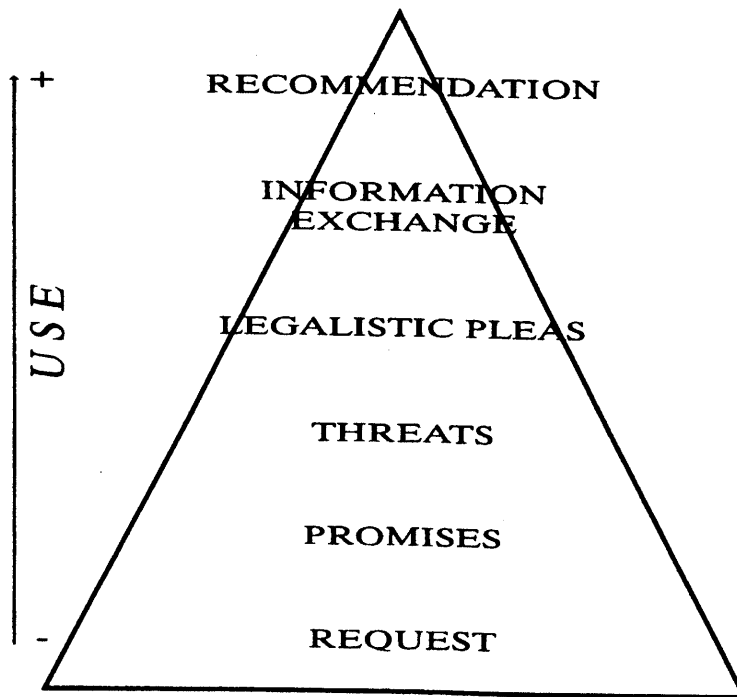


Figure 2 Ranking of use of influence strategies

analysis is preferred to cluster analysis because, while Chaid segments are derived to predict a dependent variable (in this case, type of influence strategy), cluster analysis may not be predictive. Also, in Chaid analysis segments are defined as explicit functions of the predictor. Hence, the definitions can be applied easily to classify a new sample into these segments.

To obtain the criterion variable (type of influence strategy used by a supplier), several steps were carried out. First, we estimated the overall levels of noncoercive and coercive influence strategies using the factor scores from the previous factor analysis, following the methodology suggested by Jöreskog and Sörbom (1989). The new two (latent) variables were named: 'Noncoercive influence strategies' and 'Coercive influence strategies'.

Then, for each distributor, we computed the difference between both strategy values, assigning the result to a categorical variable ('Type of influence'). Three values were possible: '-1', if 'Noncoercive influence strategies' is greater than 'Coercive influence strategies'; '0', if the difference between both values is smaller than or equal to .5; '1', if coercive strategy is more important than noncoercive strategy. Thus, we had built a trichotomous categorical variable.

The predictor variable is the type of supplier, a variable with six categories corresponding to the brand supplied: IBM, Hewlett Packard, Apple, Olivetti, Fujitsu and Inves. Using the nominal method, and

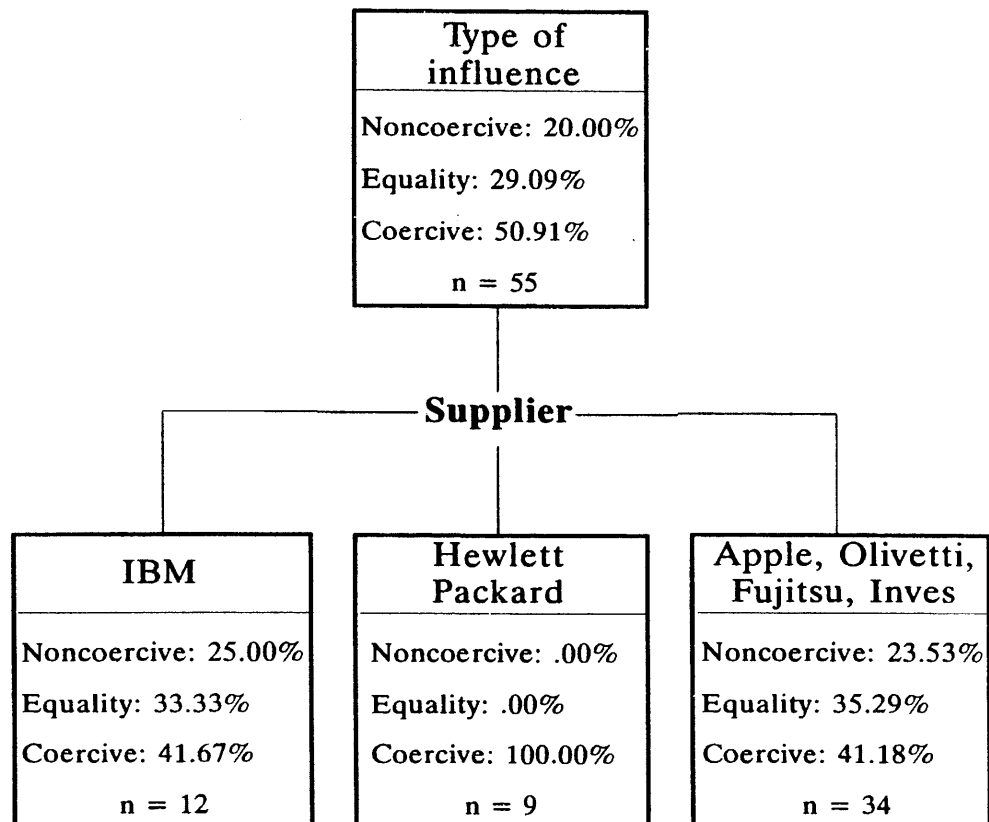
**Table 3** Table of suppliers by influence type after merging

<i>Brand group</i>	<i>Type of influence strategy used by suppliers (%)</i>			
	<i>Noncoercive</i>	<i>Equality</i>	<i>Coercive</i>	<i>Total</i>
IBM	25.00	33.33	41.67	12
Hewlett-Packard	.00	.00	100.00	9
Apple, Olivetti, Fujitsu, Inves	23.53	35.29	41.18	34
Total	20.00	29.09	50.91	55

LR Chi-square = 13.88, df = 4, prob = .0077

merging no significant categories, the segments or groups attained from Chaid analysis are shown in Table 3 and graphically presented in the form of a diagram in Figure 3.

Table 3 shows the percentage of distributors in each brand category that perceived one or another type of influence strategy being used. The table also displays the probability value ( $p$  value) the  $p$  value for the brand groups obtained shows that it is a significant predictor ( $p = .0077 < .01$ ).



**Figure 3** Tree diagram for type of influence strategy used by each computer brand

## Conclusions

The first contribution of this paper is to extend the empirical understanding of the use of influence strategies by manufacturers as perceived by retailers. Thus, all strategies show significant levels of use. On the individual level – that is, each strategy individually considered – noncoercive influence strategies of recommendation and information exchange are the most prevalent; legalistic pleas and threats are at a middle level; and promises and requests are the less preferred.

However, from a global point of view, the Chaid analysis reveals that coercive influence strategies are more prevalent than the non-coercive ones, as perceived by retailers (50.91 per cent of cases). In particular, this is the case with Hewlett Packard, for which all retailers suggest higher levels of coercive strategies than of noncoercive ones. Up to a point this is also the situation with IBM, Apple, Olivetti, Fujitsu and Inves. Non-coercive strategies are used by 20 per cent of suppliers, excluding Hewlett Packard. There is also a significant percentage of cases (29.09 per cent) where equality exists between the use of each type of strategy. And approximately, one out of every three distributors of IBM, Apple, Olivetti, Fujitsu or Inves deems that there is an equilibrium between the two types of strategies.

A conclusion that can be drawn is the distinctive behaviour of Hewlett Packard, according to its market. The common use of coercive strategies by Hewlett Packard is due to the market power held by this brand. So, Hewlett Packard endeavours to minimize inefficiencies in retailing by influencing the retailer to take action not inherently in the retailer's best interest. They develop marketing activities directed to end users to induce them to ask intermediaries for the products and thus provoke the intermediaries to order the product from the manufacturer. The rest of suppliers do not carry out a single clearly defined strategy, and both strategies are taken into account. This heterogeneity is natural: neither do all retailers present the same levels of performance nor do all manufacturers manage their channel in the same way.

Due to the fact that the brands analysed hold high levels of market power, it might seemingly be easier for manufacturers to use coercive strategies as a general rule. Nevertheless, several factors should be borne in mind: competence, performance, channel management policy, etc. To be precise, due to the increasingly competitive environment among companies, manufacturers need to manage their relationships with retailers. In this competitive context, *relationalism* contributes to the creation of a competitive advantage. Also, it should be borne in mind that relational exchange implies more interdependence. Accordingly, the use of coercive influence strategies by manufacturers on retailers is becoming less common, and we can predict a progressive change towards a relational

exchange. Manufacturers and retailers risk losing mutual benefits which may deter manufacturers from using noncoercive strategies. Boyle *et al.* (1992) concluded that relationalism limits the use of coercive influence strategies. In addition, the degree of use of influence strategies depends on the type of channel structure.

### **Future research needs**

A variety of research needs can be suggested. The most obvious one is the empirical investigation of the determinants of the use of one strategy or another. This knowledge could help us to explain a retailer's decisions about, for example, brands in store, assortment, merchandising, etc.

A second research need is to link the different strategies used by suppliers with operational variables such as speed of delivery, procedures for dealing with faults, attitudes towards a product held by consumers, etc.

In addition, this study can be placed in the context of the development of buyer–seller relationships. Under the relational marketing approach, companies should implement a programme to manage exchange relationships based on the concept of relationalism (Macneil 1980). One of the key components of this programme is the use of influence strategies. So, the type of influence strategies used and the stage of development of the relationship could be investigated. Thus, future work must be directed to study channel issues in different phases of the process of relationship development. It is also important to consider multiple channel constructs on order to weigh up all 'interconstructs' effects (direct and indirect effects).

Some limitations must be taken into account. The results of our study must be generalized with caution. Our empirical study was performed in only one industry and one country.

### **Notes**

- 1 For power literature review, see Gaski (1984), Lusch and Ross (1985) and Butaney and Wortzel (1988).
- 2 Frazier and Rody (1991), in the prestudy interviews, decided to consider the information exchange strategy identified by Frazier and Summers (1984) as divided into two strategies: 'information exchange' and 'discussion of business strategy'. Our pretest did not reveal such a division.

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