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DOI
10.1080/16258312.2025.2525741

Publication date
2025

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Supply Chain Forum

Supply Chain Forum: An International Journal

ISSN: 1625-8312 (Print) 1624-6039 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tscf20

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To cite this article: Kartika Nurhayati, Lóránt Tavasszy & Jafar Rezaei (13 Jul 2025): The power dynamics unveiled: who pulls the strings in high-tech B2B decision-making?, Supply Chain Forum: An International Journal, DOI: 10.1080/16258312.2025.2525741

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/16258312.2025.2525741

Published online: 13 Jul 2025.

SUPPLY CHAIN FORUM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
https://doi.org/10.1080/16258312.2025.2525741

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The power dynamics unveiled: who pulls the strings in high-tech B2B decision-making?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the power dynamics and their impact on involvement levels and compromise complexities in B2B joint decision-making within Dutch high-tech firms. Using a five-phase framework, it investigates the asymmetrical participation of co-owning decision-makers in dyadic buyer-supplier relationships and presents a conceptual model to explain how different power sources influence business interactions. A qualitative multiple case study involving Dutch high-tech firms was conducted. The research reveals that power bases significantly determine both involvement levels and the complexities of compromises, showing a positive correlation between involvement and compromise complexity. This study provides guidance for B2B stakeholders, offering diagnostic tools for understanding power structures and strategies to enhance collaborative decision-making. Additionally, the paper recommends governance frameworks and role delineations to improve participation levels, especially for companies with less power. This scholarly work enriches the literature by clarifying the relationship between power bases, involvement levels, and compromise complexities, and extends the application of social power theory to high-tech B2B contexts.

KEYWORDS

Power dynamics; B2B; joint decision-making; involvement levels; supply chain collaboration; high-tech; Buyer-supplier relationship

Introduction

In today's complex business landscape, collaboration serves as a cornerstone for successful interorganisational relationships (Marty and Ruel 2024; Swierczek and Szozda 2024). It enables companies to pool resources, share risks, and co-create value (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Schmelzle and Mukandwal 2023). Within the context of collaboration, business-to-business (B2B) relationships stand out as a critical area of study. One key aspect of collaboration in B2B relationships is joint decision-making, a structure or a process influenced by various factors such as power dynamics and involvement levels (Chicksand 2015; Cuevas, Julkunen, and Gabrielsson 2015; Meehan and Wright 2012; Nurhayati, Rezaei, and Tavasszy 2021, 2023). In this article, we focus particularly on joint decision-making activities among high-tech dyads where innovation (Patrucco et al. 2022) and rapid decision-making (B. Kim and Oh 2005) are essential.

Recent studies have emphasised that successful B2B collaboration often depends on navigating power dependencies and aligning incentives across firms (Poissonnier, Allal-Chérif, and Le Dain 2023). These dynamics become especially salient in risk-prone or innovation-driven supply chains, where governance and joint coordination mechanisms are needed to mitigate uncertainties (Mwesiumo, Nujen, and Buvik 2021). Such contributions signal the importance of examining how power asymmetries manifest in real-world supply chains and influence cooperative outcomes.

Despite extensive work on how joint decision-making is prone to influences coming from company's exercise of power, little is known about how power bases operate in the fast-paced, knowledge-intensive environments of high-tech industries where decision stakes are high. While previous studies have established that power symmetry or asymmetry is crucial for managing business interactions (Benton and Maloni 2005; D. Kim et al. 2023; Dada and Onyas 2021; Dwyer; Qiu 2018; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Mallin and Ragland 2017), our understanding remains incomplete on its relation to *joint* decision-making processes.

High-tech B2B collaborations often rely on fast innovation and complex product development. In such contexts, power asymmetries can greatly affect outcomes: stronger firms may leverage proprietary technology or intellectual property as a source of power to influence the deployment and outcome of joint projects. However, Connor, Lowry, and Treiblmaier (2020) find that in high-tech electronics supply chains, inter-organisational cooperation enabled by balanced

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power significantly improves supplier performance. Similarly, Lissillour and Bonet Fernandez (2020) demonstrate how institutions can sustain long-term influence by leveraging soft forms of power embedded in governance structures. Understanding power dynamics is not only theoretically valuable but practically urgent, as firms increasingly engage in co-development, data-sharing, and IP-based partnerships that require nuanced power negotiation.

This study contributes by bridging the conceptual gap between power sources, power bases, and joint decision-making behaviours, offering a structured lens to interpret influence and participation across decision phases. Addressing this gap advances scholarly knowledge on how structural and perceptual power factors interact to shape strategic outcomes in innovation-driven supply chains.

Building on the seminal work of French and Raven (1959), who introduced the 'five bases of power', this study focuses specifically on two primary determinants: power sources and perceptions of power. Power sources, such as market positioning and company size, significantly influence the power bases a company utilises (Gölgeci, Murphy, and Johnston 2018; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Rahim 1989), while the perception of power might plausibly shape behaviours, strategies, and decision-making processes within buyer-supplier relationships. Although French and Raven identified five bases of power, extensive research has already explored the other three dimensions – legitimate, reward, and coercive power – highlighting their roles in various organisational contexts. Our study extends French and Raven's framework to innovation-intensive B2B contexts, explaining how power sources like market dominance or technical expertise translate into influence during joint decision-making. This focus fills a gap, since prior power studies seldom address how power plays out in high-tech joint decisions.

To bridge the gap between the theoretical underpinnings of power bases and the practical implications in high-tech B2B contexts, this study poses two research questions: *1) How does a set of power sources of high-tech companies lead to their exercise of certain power bases? 2) How do the dynamics of power bases impact the outcomes of joint decision-making?* We address these questions by shedding light on what happens within the process or structure of joint decision-making, examining the involvement levels of decision-makers and the way they make compromises as plausible results of power at play.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on power dynamics, involvement levels, and joint decision-making in B2B relationships. Section 3 presents the research methodology, including the qualitative multiple case study approach and data collection techniques. Section 4 discusses the findings, analysing how power bases influence involvement levels and compromise complexities. Section 5 offers a detailed discussion on the implications of these findings for both theory and practice. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper with a summary of key insights, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

Literature review

Collaboration is a cornerstone of modern business practices, and within the context of collaboration, decision-making stands as a pivotal pillar. In the context of business-to-business (B2B) relationships, joint decision-making emerges as a complex interplay of various factors, with power dynamics plausibly being paramount. French and Raven (1959) laid the foundational framework for understanding power dynamics by introducing the 'five bases of power': legitimate, reward, coercive, referent, and expert power. This foundational theory has since informed numerous studies of B2B relationships (Dada and Onyas 2021; D. Kim et al. 2023), particularly in contexts involving negotiation, control, and mutual dependence. More recent research emphasises the dynamic interplay between relational governance and perceived power, showing how the use of power bases affects supplier compliance and joint decision effectiveness (Mwesiumo, Nujen, and Buvik 2021; Poissonnier, Allal-Chérif, and Le Dain 2023;).

In high-tech industries, power dynamics take on heightened significance due to the sector's reliance on specialised knowledge, rapid innovation cycles, and complex technological interdependence among firms. These characteristics amplify the role of expert and legitimate power, as firms frequently depend on partners' proprietary technologies or certifications to co-develop and deliver complex products (Teece 2007). Moreover, fast-changing market demands in high-tech contexts require joint decision-making to be agile yet structured, often amplifying the influence of power asymmetries in choosing technologies, suppliers, or timelines. Therefore, applying French and Raven's power base theory within this high-tech B2B setting enables a more context-sensitive analysis of how influence is asserted and negotiated under uncertainty and time pressure.

Before delving into the implications of these power bases, it is crucial to understand and perceive the sources of power. Power bases are influenced by various company capabilities or resources, such as market positioning, company size, and expertise (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Rahim 1989; Siemieniako 2024). Power sources refer to the various company capabilities or resources that influence the types of power bases adopted by a company (Rahim 1989). For instance, leading market players or larger companies with

strong capital might lean on legitimate power (French and Raven 1959), while those with specialised capabilities might favour expert power (Hinkin and Schriesheim 1989). In high-tech industries, for example, firms that control key patents or invest heavily in R&D often draw on expert power to shape technical decisions or assert influence during product development. Moreover, the resources a company commands can also dictate its power bases (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Diverse resources might enable a company to use a blend of power bases, such as expert and reward power (Emerson 1962). Conversely, a scarcity of resources can pose operational threats. For example, a lack of technological prowess can potentially jeopardise a firm's competitive stance (Porter 1980; Teece 2007). Such threats coming from vulnerabilities of resources can, in turn, influence the power bases a company exercises.

To investigate power sources, researchers may ask respondents about their company's competitive advantage, strong value proposition, or unique selling point. This inquiry helps gain insights into various aspects that contribute to a company's success in the market. Firstly, understanding the number of competitors allows for a comprehensive analysis of the competitive landscape and helps identify the company's position within it (Smith 2019). Secondly, probing about market positioning and branding sheds light on how the company differentiates itself from competitors and establishes a distinct market presence . Furthermore, exploring the market size provides an understanding of the company's potential reach and growth opportunities (A. Brown 2018). Additionally, inquiring about the number of supply base alternatives and client base alternatives helps gauge the company's ability to secure reliable sources and maintain a diverse customer portfolio (Jones 2020). Moreover, considering the company's size aids in comprehending its scale of operations and resources available (Davis 2016). Lastly, understanding the company's value proposition or unique selling point reveals the specific features or benefits that set it apart from others in the industry (Thompson 2015). By probing respondents about these factors, a comprehensive understanding of a company's competitive advantage and unique selling points can be obtained, contributing to a well-rounded analysis of power sources in the market.

Perception of Power – We use the term to refer to the way power is understood and interpreted within buyer-supplier relationships, particularly in knowledge-intensive and high-tech sectors. In these contexts, firms often lack full visibility into each other's technical competencies, IP portfolios, or decision-making autonomy – making perception an especially powerful mechanism. According to the study 'The Perception of Power' by Samuel B. Bacharach and E. Lawler (1976), when two parties are involved in a conflict, they would use situational cues to form subjective power estimates. This is because the perception of power is subject to ambiguity in power capabilities – actors in any interaction involving the use of power seldom have perfect information about their own and others' capabilities or resources to enable exercising a certain power base. The study discusses how managing impressions of power can lead to extracting compromises from an adversary greater than would be predicted from objective power capabilities, for example, the use of coercive power may create an impression of potency. Empirical research in high-tech supply chains further supports this view; for instance, Poissonnier, Allal-Chérif, and Le Dain (2023) emphasise that perception-based dynamics such as trust and relational incentives strongly influence supplier alignment and joint decision quality.

In the world of buyer-supplier relationships, perception of power is pivotal. This perception, which reflects how companies view power distribution between them, shapes behaviours, strategies, and decision-making (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Depending on their perceived power stance, companies might lean on specific power bases to exert influence. For instance, companies who perceives as having dominant resources might favour coercive or reward power, while those feeling less powerful might prioritise referent or expert power (French and Raven 1959). Balanced power perceptions might foster collaborative decision-making, emphasising power bases like informational and legitimate power.

Understanding and perceiving power sources and power bases set the stage for examining their implications on compromises in joint decision-making within B2B contexts. In practice, these dynamics often surface in joint innovation projects or IP-sharing agreements, where firms with greater technical leverage or legal control may influence how decisions unfold or how risks and rewards are distributed. Each power base has distinct characteristics that influence the nature of compromises made during joint decision-making.

Involvement in five phases of joint decision-making

In a B2B collaboration context, power bases can translate into the ability of companies to participate or withdraw from several steps or phases the joint decision-making process. Participation in the process steps can be seen as a way to exercise power, as it enables a company to influence the outcome of the decision. Withdrawal, on the other hand, can also be seen as a way to exercise power, as it signals to the other party that the company is not willing to accept the proposed outcome unless its interests are met. According to

Håkansson and Snehota (2017), participation and withdrawal are two key tactics that companies can use to exercise power in a B2B collaboration.

To analyse stakeholder involvement, scholars recommend decomposing joint decision-making into clear, sequential phases (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, and Théorêt 1976; Poole et al. 2000; Rogers 2010). Decision-making frameworks vary—Brim et al. (1962) propose six steps from problem identification to execution, while Schwenk (1984) introduces goal formulation as a first step, and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) group the process into predisposition, search, and choice.

In B2B joint decision-making, involvement levels may differ across phases for several reasons: task ambiguity (Schwenk 1984), perceptual differences in urgency (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, and Théorêt 1976), or unequal dependency on the decision's outcome (Fox and Staw 1979). For instance, Mintzberg et al. split problem identification into recognition and diagnosis, showing how deeper analysis affects who participates. This study adopts a similar lens, viewing joint decisions as structured processes where stakeholders may contribute unevenly from problem framing to implementation.

In this study, we partition the phases in decision-making which may help us to observe the particular activities of each actor into manageable parts. Inspired from the literature, we propose that the decision-making process can be divided into five main phases, including i) problem recognition, ii) information search, iii) evaluation of alternatives, iv) choice, and v) implementation.

Companies can use their power bases to participate or withdraw from each of these phases. For example, a company with a strong expertise power base may participate heavily in the information search and evaluation phases to ensure that its knowledge is taken into account, while a company with a strong reward power base may use its resources to incentivise the other party to choose a certain alternative.

Further, companies may leverage different power bases to secure varying degrees of involvement in decision-making. For example, a firm with expert power may aim for early-stage involvement where its specialised knowledge can be most impactful (Salancik and Pfeffer 1977). On the other hand, companies wielding reward or coercive power might exert their influence later in the decision-making process (Emerson 1962). The decision outcome can be influenced by the degree of participation or withdrawal of each party in each phase of the process. For example, a company that withdraws from the evaluation phase may signal to the other party that its interests are not being met, and that it may not accept the proposed outcome. This can lead to a renegotiation of the decision, where the withdrawing company may gain more favourable terms. On the other hand, a company that participates heavily in the evaluation phase may be able to influence the other party to choose an alternative that is more favourable to its interests. Importantly, the dynamics are not static; they evolve, often leading to shifts in power bases as involvement levels change (S. P. Brown, Lusch, and Muehling 1983; K. Kim and Frazier 1997). Previous literature also suggests that power perceptions may influence the desire for involvement (Thibaut & Walker, 1975).

Building on the theoretical framework, it's crucial to understand how one can identify the power base being exercised by a company in real-world settings (See Table 1). We can use Table 1 as reference to facilitate coding and labelling process of interviews, drawing from instances that are discussed by respondents (see Methodology section). This identification can be approached by way of observing the way companies make compromises with their partner. The nature of compromises made during joint decision-making (Chen et al. 2017; Rezaei et al. 2020) can serve as a lens to understand underlying power bases. For instance, the party making more concessions may perceive itself as less powerful, while the one receiving more may feel more powerful (Gimenez, Sierra, and Rodon 2012).

Involvement in B2B decision-making as a power strategy

Companies can influence their perceived power in B2B relationships by moderating the degree of their participation or involvement. Being passive or less involved can be interpreted as having less power, while threats of withdrawal can indicate a higher power position. The effectiveness of this strategy is also influenced by the relationship's context and the parties' relative importance (Apospori and Ioannou 2012; Harker and Gillingham 2014; Sheffi and Rice 2015; Sting and Bode 2015).

Different drivers, like passive disengagement and threatening behaviour, can influence a company's involvement. A passive stance might reduce perceived influence, while threats can motivate partners to accommodate a company's needs. However, this tactic should be used judiciously, considering potential relationship risks (Keohane and Nye 1977; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995; Webster 1992).

A company's power base may influence where it wants more control within the decision-making process (French and Raven 1959). Companies with certain power bases may desire more intense involvement in certain phases throughout the full process, more than in the rest of the phases, which may affect the outcomes of joint decisions. For example, it can be assumed that those with expert power may not only seek earlier involvement but also care to contribute more in the early phases of the joint decision-making,

Table 1. Power base instances.

Power base	Definition	Implications for Joint Decision-Making	Characteristics	Instances
Legitimate Power	Authority derived from formal role or contract (French and Raven 1959)	Enforces compliance via formal agreements and roles. In joint decisions, legitimate power means a firm can require contractual adherence (e.g. strict specifications or deadlines).	Authority	One party may have the final say due to their position or role, even if they consider input from others.
			Delegation	If one party delegates tasks or decisions to another, they are likely exercising legitimate power.
Reward Power	Ability to grant benefits or incentives	Shapes negotiations through incentives. Firms with reward power steer joint decisions by offering discounts, favors or priority access, leading partners to compromise in their favor.	Incentives	One party may offer rewards or benefits to the other in exchange for agreement or compliance.
			Negotiation	The party with reward power might use perks as negotiation chips.
Coercive Power	Ability to impose penalties or withhold rewards	Drives one-sided compromises. Coercive power leads firms to concede to avoid punishment (e.g. penalties, canceled contracts), which can curtail open negotiation and increase conflict.	Threats	One party may subtly or overtly threaten negative consequences if their terms are not met.
			Pressure	The use of urgency or stress to force a decision can be a sign of coercive power.
Referent Power	Influence based on admiration, respect or likability	Encourages voluntary concessions. When one partner values the other's reputation, joint decisions tend to be collaborative, with parties making concessions to maintain the relationship.	Persuasion	One party may rely on their charisma or emotional connection to influence the other.
			Loyalty	If one party concedes points out of respect or admiration for the other, referent power is likely at play.
Expert Power	Influence from specialized knowledge or skills	Grants early involvement and trust. Firms with expert power lead technical phases of decision-making, so they push for early participation (e.g. in design or sourcing) and often guide final choices.	Advice	One party may defer to the other's expertise or specialized knowledge.
			Rationale	The party with expert power will often provide logical, well-reasoned arguments that the other party respects.

more than how much they want to control the final phases. Similarly, it can be assumed that those with coercive power may seek even higher involvement or control in the final phase than in the other phases.

Theoretical frameworks

To support the conceptual foundation of this study, two theoretical perspectives complementary to the joint decision-making model are used to frame the relationship between power sources, power bases, and their influence on joint decision-making.

Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) posits that organisations are not self-sufficient and must acquire critical resources from external entities, creating dependencies that shape interorganisational power. The firm that controls scarce, valuable, or non-substitutable resources holds influence over others. In the context of high-tech B2B relationships, firms with technological superiority, intellectual property, or access to niche markets often occupy dominant positions. These resource-based advantages translate into different power bases (e.g. expert or legitimate power) depending on how firms deploy their assets to steer collaborative decision-making. Thus, RDT helps explain how underlying firm characteristics – such as size, market reach, or R&D capability – give rise to particular power strategies.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau 1964; Emerson 1962) views organisational relationships as ongoing exchanges of value – material, informational, or symbolic. Power emerges from asymmetries in these exchanges. SET highlights how different power bases generate different expectations and patterns of reciprocity. For example, firms using coercive or reward power may foster transactional, compliance-driven interactions, while those leveraging referent or expert power may encourage trust-based, cooperative behaviours. These dynamics, in turn, shape the nature and complexity of compromises made during joint decision-making. SET thus provides a relational lens to understand not just the structural use of power, but how it is perceived, negotiated, and reciprocated across decision phases.

The combination of RDT and SET lenses provides both a structural and behavioural understanding of how power emerges and operates in high-tech B2B decision-making contexts. RDT highlights the roots of power in organisational resources, while SET explains how that power is exercised and perceived during collaborative exchanges.

Propositions

Based on the literature study and theoretical frameworks, we propose the following propositions regarding the relationship between power sources, power bases, and involvement in joint decision-making:

Proposition 1: *Companies' power sources are associated with their choice of exercised power bases*. This

suggests that factors such as market positioning and company size influence the type of power – such as expert, legitimate, or coercive – that a company tends to utilise. This proposition draws on Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), which posits that organisations seek to manage dependencies by leveraging their access to critical resources. Firms with extensive market reach, technological assets, or brand capital often convert these power sources into specific power bases – such as legitimate power from institutional status or expert power from technical authority. As Emerson (1962) suggests, the dependence of one party on another creates a power imbalance rooted in resource control.

Proposition 2: *Exercised power bases are associated with the type of compromises made during joint decision-making*. Different power bases lead to different negotiation behaviours and outcomes, affecting how companies make trade-offs and reach agreements. This proposition is rooted in Social Exchange Theory (Blau 1964), which views interfirm interactions as reciprocal exchanges where power can be exercised through inducements (reward power) or deterrents (coercive power). The theory predicts that different forms of power lead to distinct patterns of give-and-take. For instance, referent and expert power often lead to collaborative compromises, whereas coercive power is associated with more one-sided concessions and resistance (Bacharach and Lawler 1980; Lawler 1992).

Proposition 3: *Exercised power bases are associated with the level of involvement in different phases of a joint decision-making structure*. For instance, companies that exercise expert, legitimate, and/or referent power are more likely to seek early involvement in decision-making processes than those exercising reward and coercive power. This proposition is informed by insights from Strategic Decision-Making Process Models (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, and Théorêt 1976; Schwenk 1984) and supported by Salancik and Pfeffer (1977), who highlight that firms with technical authority or institutional legitimacy tend to assert influence in early problem-definition and option-evaluation stages. In contrast, firms relying on transactional leverage (e.g. reward or coercive power) tend to assert influence closer to the decision or implementation phases, where control over execution matters most. This aligns with the idea that the nature of a firm's power base influences not only the outcome but also the timing and intensity of its involvement in collective decisions.

Methodology

This paper serves as a component of an overarching research initiative, specifically focusing on power structure and decision-making within high-tech B2B relationships, adopting an empirical, interpretative, and descriptive framework. The research design and analytical approach are informed by existing scholarly work (Nurhayati, Tavasszy, and Rezaei 2023). It is essential to note that the data collection method remains consistent with a previous journal article, given that the current paper is an extension of the same overarching project. While the data collection approach remains unchanged, the questions posed in the current study differ, ensuring that the content is mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive.

A multi-case study methodology forms the backbone of this investigation. To deepen and enrich the insights gained from this study, it is essential to include a sufficient number of cases to support future assertions and, where appropriate, enable cautious generalisations. As noted by Halinen and Törnroos (2005), 1286), a case study approach is particularly well-suited for exploring business networks and their contemporary dynamics. Unlike statistical sampling methods, case study research does not involve randomly selected units; rather, the unit of analysis is defined by the phenomenon under investigation (Yin 1989). Yin (2003) explains that multiple case designs can serve either to produce similar outcomes – known as literal replication – or to yield contrasting outcomes for theoretically grounded reasons – known as theoretical replication (47). To select cases in a structured and purposeful manner, theoretical sampling is applied (Ragin 1987; Yin 1989). Moreover, to ensure analytical focus and avoid overgeneralisation, it is important to define clear boundaries for each case. As Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) emphasise, these boundaries help align case design with the research question. Accordingly, cases can be bounded by definition and context to maintain a manageable and meaningful scope (Miles and Huberman 1994). Case studies are an effective method of exploration in areas where there is a need to understand complex social phenomena (Bonoma 1985; Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2009).

Selection of cases and respondents

Following Halinen and Törnroos (2005), the case study method proves particularly suitable for examining corporate networks and current phenomena. The unit of analysis in this method is not randomly chosen, as in statistical methods, but is strategically selected using theoretical sampling principles (Ragin 1987; Yin 1989). In this study, case selection criteria encompass three key dimensions: i) company size determined by turnover and total number of employees, ii) position in the manufacturing supply chain (whether a company is a supplier or a buyer in an investigated dyad), and iii)

collaboration type that meet the criteria of Lambert's (1996) concept of 'partnership', referring to a form of collaboration positioned between the two extremes of arm's length and fully integrated supply chain. These criteria were chosen deliberately to provide a comprehensive overview of cases, considering factors such as turnover, public or private status, number of employees, years of establishment, and collaboration characteristics. The aim is to capture diversity across these attributes, ensuring the generated conclusions are applicable across a broad spectrum (Nurhayati, Tavasszy, and Rezaei 2023).

The study focuses specifically on the collaborative decision-making processes of interdependent manufacturers and suppliers. The scope excludes joint ventures, horizontal connections or competitions, arm's length relationships, and vertically integrated supply chains. The study assumes that the chosen relationships involve companies with greater freedom and less restrictive arrangements in directing their supply chain strategies (Nurhayati, Tavasszy, and Rezaei 2023).

Dutch firms were selected due to the Netherlands' strong footprint in the high-tech manufacturing and semiconductor sectors, home to globally integrated supply chains and innovation-intensive firms. This context offers a fertile ground to observe how power dynamics unfold in knowledge-intensive partnerships. While this focus may limit broad generalisability to other national contexts, it enhances the study's internal validity by providing rich, contextual insights into how power is exercised in one of Europe's most advanced B2B innovation ecosystems. Moreover, studying firms within the same regulatory and institutional framework reduces confounding variance and allows more precise attribution of observed power patterns to organisational dynamics rather than macro-level differences.

Based on the above criteria, the data collection phase targeted 12 Dutch high-tech manufacturers with operating offices in the Netherlands, specifically in tech hubs like Delft, Eindhoven, and Amsterdam (see Table 2). The geographical proximity is designed to facilitate face-to-face 60–90 minutes interviews, enhancing the comfort level of respondents. The criteria for selecting respondents include job titles related to supply chain management, sourcing or procurement, and a minimum of eight years of professional experience. The recruitment process utilised LinkedIn Premium's advanced search database to identify and contact relevant company representatives.

The respondents interviewed represented a variety of departments or business functions within the supply chain domain, such as sourcing, planning, procurement, and logistics. This ensured a comprehensive view of the supply chain ecosystem and is in line with the suggestions made by Touboulic et al. (2015) about the importance of considering different perspectives in supply chain research. To mitigate response bias, we included probing and definitions with each question, and respondents provided examples in their own words. All participants used consistent terminologies. Early and late interviews for cases with similar attributes showed no significant differences in respondent knowledge. The concept of familiarity ensured respondents claimed familiarity with suppliers they had interacted with professionally for at least one year, ensuring reliable data.

In the beginning, before each interview, each respondent was prompted to consider a dyadic relationship with one B2B supplier and another dyad with one B2B customer, from their perspective as a focal company, and elaborate on their company's associations with these entities. The primary focus was on unravelling the decision-making process and recurrent transactions occurring between the focal companies and their immediate collaborators both upstream and downstream in the supply chain.

Following the interviews, the responses were categorised into 22 approved cases out of 24, with two excluded cases from two different focal companies. From an initial target of 24 cases (12 companies), indirect relationships involving intermediaries were excluded. Ultimately, the study included 13 supplier and 9 manufacturer direct-interaction cases (see Table 2). Excluded cases indicate that the partners in the focal companies' dyads have no manufacturing activities in their value chain, e.g. in trading companies or retailers. Dyadic studies are particularly suited for supply chain research as they enable a focus on mutual dependencies and relational aspects (Choi and Kim 2008).

Interview questions

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with supply chain professionals from each case company. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility and allow for in-depth exploration while maintaining a consistent thematic structure (Gray 2014). The interview protocol was developed based on prior literature and tailored to test the propositions of this study (Marshall and Rossman 2014). While this study builds upon previous research within the broader project scope, it introduces refined and extended questions to align with the current research objectives.

The interviews were designed to explore the following thematic areas:

- Power Sources: Investigating the company's competitive advantage, value proposition, and resource-based positioning (e.g. market dominance, technological capability, operational flexibility, geographical advantage, financial strength). This also included identifying areas of

Table 2. List of high tech companies interviewed*.

Company	Case number	Which partner is discussed	Total years of establishment	Status	Total employees	Description
A1	C1	Supplier	31–35	Public	10,001+	The company provides industrial clients with solutions in Electrification, Process Automation, Motion, Robotics and Discrete Automation.
	C2	Buyer				
A2	C3	Supplier	6–10	Privately Held	11–50	The company is a university spin-off and provides expertise in nanoparticle manufacturing and integration. Their technology helps companies develop faster by generating nanoparticles on-site and integrating them directly into the final product. Applications includes sensor, battery, catalysis, solar cell, healthcare, additive manufacturing, and nanosafety.
	C4	Buyer				
A3	C5	Supplier	66–70	Privately Held	501–1,000	The company creates and enhances components, modules, and systems. It also provides supply chain management, milling, and sheet metal manufacturing. Industry and health-tech industries are served by the company.
	C6	Buyer				
A4	C7	Supplier	51–55	Public	1,001–5,000	The company specializes in the design, development, assembly, and maintenance of high-level functional modules and subsystems. It produces high-mix, low-volume electrical components for worldwide Original Equipment Manufacturers.
	C8	Buyer				
A5	C9	Supplier	51–55	Public	1,001–5,000	The company offers solutions for product lifecycle management of sophisticated electronic applications as an international one-stop-shop provider in the Electronic Manufacturing Services (EMS) sector, for electrical components, assemblies, and operating systems (box builds). Also, they offer customised solutions for PCBA's, cables, microelectronics and box construction applications, always striving for the lowest total cost of ownership.
	C10	Buyer				
A6	C11	Supplier	36–40	Public	10,001+	The company is a significant global supplier of lithography equipment for the semiconductor industry, producing complicated machinery required to manufacture integrated circuits or microchips.
	C12	Buyer				
A7	C13	Supplier	71–75	Privately Held	1,001–5,000	The company provides farmers with innovative solutions and personalised services for every cowshed task, from milking to cleaning. The company advises on how to operate a dairy farm efficiently using management systems.
	C14	Supplier				
A8	C15	Supplier	21–25	Privately Held	501–1,000	The company is a technology partner that specializes in the development and manufacture of technical goods and solutions. Clients hire their specialists in the areas of Technical Software, Mechatronics, Electronics, Mathware, and Assembly to augment the expertise or outsource projects. The company can assist with research and development or perhaps take on the role of the R&D and production departments.
	C16	Buyer				
A9	C17	Supplier	>100	Public	10,001+	The company delivers integrated solutions using innovative technologies and clinical and consumer data. In addition to diagnostic imaging, the firm is a pioneer in consumer health and home care.
A10	C18	Supplier	51–55	Public	1,001–5,000	The company is a global one-stop provider of Electronic Manufacturing Services (EMS), and proclaims as a market leader in: Automotive, Medical, Industrial, and Semiconductor. They provide tailored solutions for the entire product life cycle (from concept to after-sales support) of electrical components and complete (box-built) electronic control systems.
	C19	Buyer				
A11	C20	Supplier	36–40	Public	201–500	The company is leader in making highly automated beverage machine in-house for consumer and professional buyers. They focus on providing superior solutions for Office, Hotel, Restaurant, and Automatic Vending locations. They conduct their own R&D and in-house manufacturing. Initially a private company, they were acquired by a larger stakeholder to cater bigger market and became one subsidiary.
A12	C21	Supplier	11–15	Public	10,001+	The company is one of global pioneers in secure embedded connection solutions for the automotive, industrial, IoT, mobile, and communication equipment industries.
	C22	Buyer				

Sources: LinkedIn and corresponding company websites.

resource scarcity or weakness relative to competitors.

- Perception of Power: Exploring how respondents perceive their firm's power position relative to a selected supply chain partner (categorised into: more powerful, less powerful, or balanced).
- Compromises in Joint Decision-Making: Eliciting examples of past compromises made in decision-making with the partner and the rationale behind them. These responses were later used to infer the exercise of specific power bases (e.g. expert, coercive, reward).
- Involvement in Decision Phases: Understanding the respondent's degree of involvement across the five phases of joint decision-making: (i) Problem recognition, (ii) Information search, (iii) Evaluation of alternatives, (iv) Choice; (v) Implementation and monitoring
- Desire for Greater Involvement or Control: Capturing respondents' aspirations for greater decision-making authority or engagement and the strategic areas where such involvement is desired.

This structured thematic approach ensured consistency across cases while allowing for the discovery of context-specific insights.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted using a coding technique. This method aligns with Saldana (2015), who posits that coding techniques are an effective approach to qualitative data analysis as they provide a systematic way to identify, categorise and explore patterns in the data. The coding was guided by the initial research questions and propositions to ensure the relevancy of the results obtained.

We analysed recorded and transcribed interviews from 22 cases using NVivo™ for content and thematic analysis. The process involved automatic transcription with manual corrections, coding based on an indexing system, and a matrix coding query to identify co-occurrences of drivers and facilitators in each case. The results were thematically discussed to infer associations between joint decision-making drivers and facilitators. The study's implications for theory and practice were explored in the final analysis.

To enhance the rigour and credibility of this study, several validation strategies were employed. First, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to ensure our interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Second, we used triangulation by cross-referencing our coding with existing literature to reduce interpretive bias (Denzin 2017). This iterative process strengthened our understanding of evolving power dynamics in high-tech B2B contexts.

The coding process followed a structured approach: Thematic analysis was first applied to identify emerging patterns such as compromises and trade-offs as indicators of power bases. These themes were then mapped to categories like 'Power Base by Focal Company' and 'Power Base by Partner' to analyse influence. Each categorisation was supported by verbatim excerpts and aligned with theoretical frameworks, particularly French and Raven's bases of power.

Despite the depth afforded by the multiple case study design, generalisability remains limited. The findings are context-specific to the semiconductor industry and may not extend to sectors with different market dynamics. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported interview data may introduce response bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Nonetheless, the use of document triangulation and validation procedures mitigates these risks and reinforces the trustworthiness of our conclusions.

Results and analysis

Power sources

Across the interviews, respondents identified various power sources, which were grouped into five main categories (see Table 3). Market position and power included factors like low competition, large market size, and strong supply/client bases, giving firms leverage in the industry. Technological capability reflected specialisations, co-development ability, and proven quality, enabling innovation and competitiveness. Operational flexibility covered volume responsiveness, delivery reliability, product diversity, and end-to-end solutions, supporting adaptability and customer satisfaction. Geographical advantage – whether local or global – offered benefits like proximity, reduced logistics costs, and broader market access. Financial capacity was indicated by revenue, spending, size, and organisational maturity, shaping investment readiness and resilience.

Respondents also pointed to areas of weakness, including lack of co-development ability, narrow technological scope, poor brand image, limited finances, absence of rare tech, low agility, and underdeveloped processes and IT systems (see Table 4). Table 5 summarises resource strengths and gaps per company.

Perceived power

Across the cases, three distinct patterns of perceived power emerged: dominance, dependence, and balance. In cases like C5, C11, C13, and C14, focal companies perceived themselves as more powerful due to size, patent ownership, or market access. These firms

Table 3. Results: five resource type.

	Resource type
	1. Market position and power
R1	Low competitor in product/service domain
R2	Big market size/global footprint
R3	High supply base alternatives, incl access to tier suppliers
R4	High client base alternatives
R5	Exclusivity
R6	Stable demand, demand transparency, repeat purchases
R7	Brand image & product maturity, learning opportunities related
R8	Multiple/heterogeneous market portfolio (so when one market is down, we still have other markets to rely on)
	2. Technological capability and expertise
R9	High specialisation in technology, Capability to develop product with customer (or to teach supplier) & speedy prototyping
R10	Exceptional reliability & quality
R11	Proven track record
R12	Large capacity to make big components
R13	Niche: Just One small player with NO direct competitors with small/niche market cap
	3. Operational flexibility and efficiency
R14	Capability to provide Flexibility of volume (incl. fast response to market, absorb inventory shock)
R15	Reliability of time, steady delivery, speed, short lead time
R16	Diversity of product & service portfolio/menu
R17	End to end solution
R18	Locked in with our partner, Long transaction history, ability to co-create product, to test product during product development (difficult to find in another supplier)
R19	Good price point, incl. reduced TCO and cost transparency
	4. Geographical advantage and proximity
R20	Geographical advantage (local supplier)
R21	Geographical advantage (is an international client)
	5. Financial capacity and resources
R22	High representation of finance (revenue)
R23	High representation of finance (spending)
R24	Company size (big or small)
R25	Maturity and health of organization

Table 4. Results: a list of threats.

T1	Similar competitor production rate
T2	Company size
T3	Not fully able to assist our client to make drawings/develop product
T4	High specialisation in technology, Capability to develop product with customer & speedy prototyping
T5	Lack of brand image
T6	Lack of financial resource, since we are a small client (single digit income for our supplier)
T7	Not rare tech
T8	Lack of agility to adapt demand fluctuation
T9	Processes are not fully mature yet, and lack of IT support.
T10	Too broad of scope and product diversification

often represented a large share of their partner's income or held critical assets, such as intellectual property.

Conversely, firms in C1, C2, C4, and C8 saw themselves as less powerful – often due to their reliance on a larger supplier or client, limited market alternatives, or low strategic importance in the value chain. These perceptions were tied to economic dependency, weak negotiation positions, or lack of transparency from the partner.

Balanced dynamics were reported in cases like C3, C10, and C17, where mutual dependence, co-development, or transparent collaboration helped maintain equilibrium. Some cases, such as C20, revealed nuanced perceptions, where power was acknowledged but carefully managed to avoid conflict.

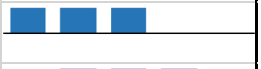
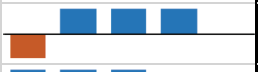
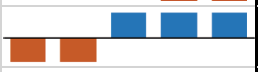
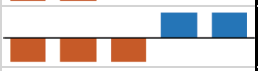
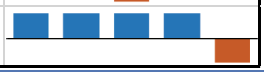
These findings underline that perceived power is relational and context-dependent, often influenced by both structural conditions and trust-building efforts.

Compromises (trade-offs)

Compromise emerged as a central theme in supplier-client dynamics, taking various forms across cases. We classified trade-offs into seven categories:

- Pricing and Financial Considerations: In C1, C2, C5, and C22, firms negotiated around cost structures, profit margins, and financial incentives to balance

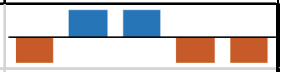
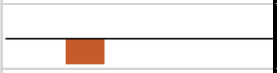
Table 5. Results: resources and threats per case.

Case number	Focal company	Partner's company	Decision type	Phases in joint decision-making					Phase influencer (Top: focal company; bottom: partner company)
				i	ii	iii	iv	v	
C1	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	-1	1	1	-1	-1	
C2	Supplier	Buyer	Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C3	Buyer	Supplier	Quality & standards; Product development	1	1	1	0	0	
C4	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	-1	1	1	1	0	
C5	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C6	Supplier	Buyer	Quality & standards	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C7	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C8	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C9	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C10	Supplier	Buyer	Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C11	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C12	Supplier	Buyer	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C13	Buyer	Supplier	Quality & standards	1	1	1	1	-1	
C14	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C15	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	-1	
C16	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	0	-1	0	0	0	
C17	Buyer	Supplier	Product development	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C18	Buyer	Supplier	Quality & standards; Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C19	Supplier	Buyer	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	-1	-1	-1	1	1	
C20	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C21	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing; Product development	1	1	-1	1	1	
C22	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	1	1	1	1	-1	

affordability with order frequency and long-term value.

- Product Quality and Specifications: C3, C6, C7, C8, C9, C10, C13, C14, C17, C18, and C20 showed compromises involving performance requirements, technical features, and quality standards – often linked to customisation or innovation needs.
- Logistics and Delivery: Firms in C3, C6, C9, C11, C12, and C20 adapted lead times and delivery schedules, particularly in the face of fluctuating demand and operational constraints.
- Supplier Autonomy and Flexibility: Cases C4, C8, C10, C15, and C16 involved trade-offs over development freedom and responsiveness, allowing suppliers to innovate while aligning with client expectations.
- Client Involvement and Relationship: In C4, C19, and C21, collaboration dynamics were central, with decisions shaped by client engagement in product direction, transparency, and trust-building.
- Volume and Capacity: C3, C11, and C22 reflected negotiations around production volumes and

Table 6. Results: involvement levels (dominance in focal company: +1, dominance in partner company: −1, non dominance indicated: 0.).

Case number	Focal company	Partner's company	Decision type	Phases in joint decision-making					Phase influencer (Top: focal company; bottom: partner company)
				i	ii	iii	iv	v	
C1	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	-1	1	1	-1	-1	
C2	Supplier	Buyer	Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C3	Buyer	Supplier	Quality & standards; Product development	1	1	1	0	0	
C4	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	-1	1	1	1	0	
C5	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C6	Supplier	Buyer	Quality & standards	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C7	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C8	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C9	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C10	Supplier	Buyer	Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C11	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C12	Supplier	Buyer	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C13	Buyer	Supplier	Quality & standards	1	1	1	1	-1	
C14	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C15	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	-1	
C16	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	0	-1	0	0	0	
C17	Buyer	Supplier	Product development	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C18	Buyer	Supplier	Quality & standards; Pricing	-1	-1	1	1	1	
C19	Supplier	Buyer	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	-1	-1	-1	1	1	
C20	Buyer	Supplier	Logistics (Transport mode, lead time)	1	1	1	-1	-1	
C21	Buyer	Supplier	Pricing; Product development	1	1	-1	1	1	
C22	Supplier	Buyer	Product development	1	1	1	1	-1	

capacity expansion to meet varying demand levels and ensure continuity.

- Future Prospects and Strategic Decisions: Long-term collaboration and planning were emphasised in C11, C14, and C21, where firms discussed forecasts, growth trajectories, and mutual investment.

Across these categories, compromises reflected deliberate balancing acts – enabling both parties to

navigate tensions and co-create solutions tailored to their shared interests.

Involvement levels

Based on the examples that the respondent provided, the involvements are illustrated In Table 6.

The desire for more involvement

Many companies expressed a desire for greater involvement in specific phases of joint decision-making. For instance, early-stage engagement was emphasised in C2, C4, C8, C10, C21, and C22, where firms wanted input during quotation formation, product design, or strategic planning. In C1, the need for deeper involvement arose when client demands fell outside standard offerings.

Transparency was another key theme. Cases like C3 and C11 sought visibility into supplier systems and operations, while C7 and C17 stressed open pricing and forecasting. Requests for digitised quality tracking (C13) and logistics transparency (C14) also reflected this demand. Similarly, C20 and C22 highlighted the importance of early collaboration for inventory and resource planning.

Several cases voiced concern over pricing and financial alignment. C5 preferred consistent pricing models during project delivery, while C10 and C21 focused on procurement's role post-development.

Timely delivery and lead time flexibility were focal points in C9, C12, and C19. C6 and C18 underscored the importance of quality assurance, especially when budgeting and compliance came into play.

Despite these calls for more influence, C16 was content with current engagement levels.

Based on these responses, firms' preferences for increased involvement fall into five categories:

- Early Stage: C2, C4, C8, C10, C21, C22
- Middle Stage: C3, C5, C13, C15, C17
- Final Stage: C6, C9, C12, C19
- Full Process: C1, C7, C11, C14, C18, C20
- No Additional Involvement: C16

These patterns reflect diverse strategic priorities, ranging from co-development and cost control to assurance and delivery precision.

Power bases analysis

Based on how compromises were negotiated, the power bases exercised by focal companies fell into five categories:

- **Legitimate Power**: Asserted in C1, C4, C8, C10, C12, and C18, where firms relied on formal authority, contract terms, or long-standing relationships to structure negotiations and enforce expectations.
- **Reward Power**: Evident in C2, C5, C11, C15, C20, and C22, where companies used incentives – such as profit-sharing, flexibility, or volume commitments – to influence partner behaviour and ensure compliance.
- **Coercive Power**: Used in C3, C6, C7, C9, and C19 to enforce terms, reject proposals, or pressure partners – typically tied to control over critical outcomes like delivery or product standards.
- **Expert Power**: Displayed in C13, C14, C17, and C21 through technical know-how, process insight,

Table 7. Results: analysed power bases of the focal company and partner's company.

Case number	Power base of focal company	Power base of partner's company
C1	Legitimate	Expert
C2	Expert	Reward
C3	Expert and Coercive	Coercive
C4	Legitimate	Expert
C5	Reward	Coercive
C6	Coercive	Legitimate
C7	Expert and Coercive	Expert
C8	Legitimate	Coercive
C9	Coercive	Expert
C10	Legitimate	Legitimate
C11	Reward	Reward
C12	Legitimate	Coercive
C13	Expert	Expert
C14	Referent	Expert
C15	Expert and Reward	Expert
C16	Legitimate	Coercive
C17	Expert	Expert
C18	Legitimate and Reward	Legitimate
C19	Coercive	Coercive
C20	Expert	Reward
C21	Expert and Reward	Expert
C22	Reward	Reward

Table 8. The association between involvement levels and the complexity of compromises in the joint decision-making process.

Case number	Power base indicated by focal company	Power base indicated by partner	Phase where more control and involvement is desired
C1	Legitimate	Expert	Full process
C2	Expert	Reward	Early stage
C3	Expert and Coercive	Coercive	Middle stage
C4	Legitimate	Expert	Early stage
C5	Reward	Coercive	Middle stage
C6	Coercive	Legitimate	Final stage
C7	Expert and Coercive	Expert	Full process
C8	Legitimate	Coercive	Early stage
C9	Coercive	Expert	Final stage
C10	Legitimate	Legitimate	Early stage
C11	Reward	Reward	Full process
C12	Legitimate	Coercive	Final stage
C13	Expert	Expert	Middle stage
C14	Referent	Expert	Full process
C15	Expert and Reward	Expert	Middle stage
C16	Legitimate	Coercive	No additional involvement desired
C17	Expert	Expert	Middle stage
C18	Legitimate and Reward	Legitimate	Full process
C19	Coercive	Coercive	Final stage
C20	Expert	Reward	Full process
C21	Expert and Reward	Expert	Early stage
C22	Reward	Reward	Early stage

or domain-specific decision-making that guided trade-offs and supplier interactions.

- **Referent Power**: Seen in C14, where mutual respect and trust influenced the firm's willingness to accept supplier input, highlighting reputational influence rather than authority or expertise.

Similarly, the power bases attributed to partner companies included:

- **Expert Power**: Cited in C1, C4, C7, C9, C13, C14, C15, and C17, where partners were viewed as technically superior or essential to product development and innovation.
- **Reward Power**: Present in C2, C11, C20, and C22, where partners offered favourable pricing, flexibility, or responsiveness in exchange for continued collaboration or strategic growth.
- **Coercive Power**: Observed in C3, C5, C8, C12, C16, and C19, where partners imposed terms, rejected inputs, or dictated specifications, often leveraging their critical role or size.
- **Legitimate Power**: Exercised in C6, C10, and C18 through formal authority, contract imposition, or price-setting rights, shaping the structure and boundaries of cooperation.

These examples illustrate the diversity of power strategies across dyads, with both focal and partner firms deploying different bases to steer negotiations, assert preferences, and reach agreement (see Table 7).

Power sources association with power bases

The analysis reveals strong patterns linking firms' power bases to the resources they rely on – and the threats they face.

Firms with Expert power (e.g. C2, C13, C14, C17, C20, C21) tend to possess strong market positioning (R1–R8), technological capability (R9–R13), and operational flexibility (R14–R19). However, they also frequently face T3 (limited ability to co-develop with clients), suggesting that deep specialisation can come with trade-offs in broader solution capability.

Firms with Coercive power (e.g. C3, C5, C6, C8, C9, C19) often leverage operational efficiency (R14–R19) to enforce decisions, but are also exposed to T10 (over-diversification), T8 (poor adaptability), and T9 (immature processes), pointing to risks of rigid, control-based approaches.

Legitimate power (e.g. C1, C4, C8, C10, C12, C16) is linked to balanced resource portfolios, spanning market access and financial capacity. These firms benefit from formal authority, enabling broad influence across operational and strategic levels.

Firms combining Legitimate and Reward power (e.g. C1, C2, C4, C8, C10, C12, C15, C16, C20, C21, C22) tend to manage diverse resources well, and often use blended influence strategies. Some (e.g. C3, C7, C15, C21) pair Expert power with others, suggesting flexible power application.

However, Reward power users (e.g. C2, C5, C11, C15, C20, C21, C22) are often linked to T1 (competitive pressure), T2 (small size), and T5 (weak brand), indicating that while incentives foster compliance, they may not strengthen long-term positioning.

Interestingly, when focal companies and their partners share the same power base (e.g. C10, C19), they often face a wider set of threats (T1–T10), hinting at intensified competition or unclear dominance. Yet, symmetry in power (e.g. C10, C16, C18, C19) may also promote resource balance and mutual dependency.

Threat T4 (need for high-tech specialisation) commonly appears among Expert-power firms (C2, C3, C7, C13, C14, C17, C20, C21), underscoring the pressure to sustain innovation. Meanwhile, Coercive-power companies often face T8–T10, revealing constraints in agility and capability maturity.

From a role-based lens, suppliers (e.g. C4, C6, C8, C10, C12, C16, C19, C22) often employ Legitimate, Reward, or Coercive power, likely reflecting their operational leverage. They also tend to possess more financial resources (R22–R25), which may be necessary for sustaining flexibility and resilience.

Buyers (e.g. C1, C3, C5, C7, C9, C11, C13–C15, C17, C18, C20, C21) frequently report T6 (financial constraints) and T3/T4 (product development and tech limitations), reflecting vulnerabilities in the high-tech supply chain where innovation and responsiveness are vital.

Two universal trends emerge:

- R1 (low competition) and R2 (large market size) are widely cited strengths.
- T1 (similar competitor capabilities) and T2 (small size) are common threats, reinforcing the competitive pressure across roles and power types.

Perceived power association with power bases

In high-tech B2B contexts, how firms perceive their power often aligns with the power bases they exercise.

Expert Power is prominent in C2, C13, C17, and C20, where technical capability shapes both perceived and actual influence. For instance, C2 sees itself as a dependent intermediary but leverages its role to guide development, while C13 collaborates closely on early-stage designs despite facing larger partners – demonstrating that perceived expertise often becomes a unique value source.

Legitimate Power is evident in C1, C4, C8, C10, and C12, where firms draw authority from their roles or contractual standing. However, these companies also acknowledge dependencies – like C1 deferring to supplier expertise, or C4 seeking more client input – highlighting a nuanced understanding of influence based on formal positioning and operational realities.

Coercive Power characterises C3, C6, C7, C9, and C19. These firms often face friction and must navigate power tensions tactically. For example, C6 deals with demanding clients through contract enforcement, while C9 mitigates dependency by sourcing redundantly – underscoring the defensive posture often linked to coercive strategies.

Reward Power appears in C5, C11, C18, C21, and C22, where companies aim to foster collaboration through incentives. While C5 contributes significantly to its supplier's income, it still faces pressure from partner autonomy; C11 seeks trust-based reciprocity. These cases reveal how reward-based dynamics hinge on sustained mutual benefit.

Mixed Power Bases emerge in C3, C7, C15, and C21. These firms combine technical expertise with coercion or reward – e.g. C15 balances supplier innovation with interaction limits, and C21 influences suppliers via storytelling and vision. Such hybrid strategies show how firms shift power applications across scenarios.

In short, perceived power and exercised power are tightly interwoven. Firms use combinations of legitimacy, expertise, reward, or coercion based not only on position or role, but also on how they interpret their standing and manage strategic dependencies. Recognising these patterns helps companies calibrate influence more deliberately across evolving supplier-client dynamics.

Compromises (trade-offs) and power bases

Compromises in joint decision-making are closely linked to how actively each party is involved. High involvement tends to produce more nuanced and mutually beneficial trade-offs, as seen in C11, where strong engagement from both sides fostered balanced outcomes. Similarly, C2 shows how extensive participation can broaden the scope of compromise, touching on pricing and availability.

Conversely, involvement can shape power dynamics. When one party dominates the process, they may convert their active role into influence – illustrated in C10, where the client's deep involvement translated into legitimate power, allowing them to enforce binding contracts. On the other hand, C15 shows that trusted participation from a supplier, coupled with autonomy, led to favourable trade-offs rooted in both performance and price – supporting a referent power shift.

Involvement can also shape how power bases evolve over time. For instance, C14 demonstrates how sustained engagement in product development allowed the supplier to gain expert power through accumulated knowledge. Meanwhile, C20 reflects how reward-based influence may restrict the other party's role, with incentives offered in exchange for reduced input.

The interaction is reciprocal: parties with expert or legitimate power often push for early or active participation (C16, C10), while those with reward or coercive power may control the process or limit shared decisions (C20, C9). Yet over time, sustained involvement often fosters trust and can transition power from coercion or reward towards more relational

forms like referent or legitimate, as seen again in C15.

In short, compromise, involvement, and power bases are mutually reinforcing. Deeper engagement can shift both the nature of power and the quality of collaboration, underscoring the need for managers to think strategically about participation across all decision phases.

The interplay between involvement and compromises

Our analysis reveals a positive association between the level of involvement in joint decision-making and the complexity of compromises (see Table 8). In Case 6, a company with strong expert power was engaged throughout all phases of decision-making. Their active role led to deeper negotiations, counterproposals, and complex compromises. In contrast, Case 12 showed that limited involvement – despite referent power – resulted in simpler, more passive trade-offs, relying on reputation rather than detailed engagement.

Broadly, firms with higher involvement tend to shape more tailored, reciprocal compromises. Lower involvement, on the other hand, often translates to unilateral or standardised concessions.

Power bases influence these preferences. Companies with expert or legitimate power usually seek early and middle-stage involvement to define standards and direction (e.g. C14, C10). Those with coercive power often intervene in later stages to enforce outcomes (C9, C19). Reward-driven firms spread their influence across phases, using incentives strategically (C2, C22).

Firms with blended power bases take flexible approaches. For example, a company with both expert and reward power may guide early choices through technical insight (C21), then offer incentives at the implementation stage. Their stage-specific strategies reflect where they believe their influence is most effective.

In short, involvement is both a reflection of and a vehicle for power. Recognising where power is most useful – whether to shape early strategy, reinforce alignment midstream, or finalise control – enables firms to manage joint decision-making more intentionally.

Discussion

Theoretical interpretation and contribution

This study sets out to explore how power sources translate into power bases and how those, in turn, shape involvement and compromises in joint decision-making processes. Our findings offer both confirmatory and surprising insights in light of Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) and Social Exchange Theory (SET), while also suggesting areas where these frameworks can be refined for the high-tech B2B context.

First, our results largely reinforce the core logic of RDT (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978): firms with critical resources (technological capability, market access, operational efficiency) tend to exercise influence through structural means like expert and legitimate power. This is evident in companies like C13 and C20, where control over patents or technical know-how translated into greater strategic influence. However, RDT's traditional focus on resource magnitude appears insufficient in our context. Some firms with objectively fewer resources – especially smaller suppliers – still exercised considerable influence by strategically positioning themselves as indispensable in a niche. This points to a qualitative dimension of dependency not captured in classical RDT. It is not simply who has more, but whose resources are harder to replace, even if scarce.

Second, Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau 1964; Emerson 1962) helps explain the behavioural dynamics observed. As expected, reward power was often used to incentivise compliance (e.g. volume promises, preferred pricing in C11, C22), while coercive power created tension or disengagement (C5, C8). This aligns with prior studies (e.g. Lawler 1992) that link coercive strategies to lower relational quality. However, in some cases, coercive tactics were surprisingly effective when paired with mutual dependency or operational lock-in, as seen in C6 and C19. This suggests that coercion can be stabilised under conditions of high switching costs – an insight that expands SET's largely relational lens with a structural contingency.

Another unexpected result emerged around referent power, which was rarely cited despite being central in French and Raven's original framework. In high-tech environments where decisions are fast-paced and information is technical, charisma or admiration appeared less influential than concrete expertise or control mechanisms. This supports the idea that referent power may be less relevant in highly rational, engineering-driven B2B environments, especially compared to contexts where interpersonal dynamics are more prominent (e.g. marketing or retail partnerships).

We also found temporal dynamics of power that are underexplored in both RDT and SET. Power was not static; it shifted across phases of decision-making. Expert and referent power played strong roles in early stages like problem recognition and information search (C2, C14), while legitimate and coercive power dominated in later stages where contracts and enforcement were involved (C10, C6). This phase-based unfolding of power reveals that different power bases are effective at different moments, an insight that deepens both theoretical frameworks which often treat power as monolithic.

Importantly, our study draws attention to perceived power asymmetry and its psychological effects. Firms like C3 or C7 saw themselves as powerful but were structurally dependent. Others, like C15, exercised influence despite seeing themselves as subordinate. This divergence between objective and subjective power challenges the assumption – common in both RDT and SET – that actors always act in line with their actual dependency position. Instead, we suggest that power perceptions mediate the exercise of power, a finding supported in part by Magee & Galinsky (2008), but rarely explored in supply chain literature.

Our findings also challenge the linear assumption that greater involvement leads to more power or better outcomes. While involvement generally correlated with influence (C11, C17), there were exceptions. In C12, for instance, limited involvement still produced favourable compromises due to the partner's dependence. This reveals that involvement is not always a function of power, but may also result from partner strategy, task complexity, or relational history. Conversely, companies with high involvement (e.g. C10) sometimes faced pushback or rigidity due to contract-bound dynamics.

In sum, this study confirms, nuances, and extends classic theories of interorganisational power:

- It confirms RDT's central idea that critical resources generate influence, but qualifies that influence based on substitutability, not just volume.
- It extends SET by showing how relational power is modulated by structural lock-ins and contextual urgency.
- It challenges the generalisability of referent power in high-tech environments and introduces phase-specific power effectiveness as a refinement to both frameworks.
- And finally, it reveals the critical role of perceived power – a psychological lens missing from most transactional theories – in shaping how firms act, react, and negotiate.

Altogether, these insights contribute to a more dynamic, context-sensitive understanding of power in B2B relationships, particularly in the fast-moving, innovation-intensive terrain of the high-tech sector.

Managerial implications

This study offers several key insights for managers in high-tech B2B environments. Understanding the influence of power dynamics on joint decision-making can significantly enhance collaborative efforts and strategic outcomes. Managers should recognise that power sources, such as market positioning and company size, play a crucial role in shaping power bases and involvement levels. By leveraging these power sources effectively, managers can navigate power asymmetries to foster more balanced and productive partnerships. Additionally, perceptions of power are vital in shaping behaviours and decision-making processes. Managers need to be aware of how their power is perceived by partners and use this knowledge to build trust and transparency in relationships. This awareness can lead to more strategic negotiations and better alignment of goals between partners.

Deriving from lessons learned in this study, below are concrete tools to apply each power base throughout the joint decision process. Here are some of the circumstances where power bases are most fit to use. Customer-facing and supplier-facing managers are encouraged to be aware of these circumstances and accordingly exercise strategies where applicable:

- Legitimate power: Early in the process, clearly define decision rights and establish formal governance (e.g. project charters or steering committees). Use legal agreements or contracts to lock in key terms during the Choice/Implementation phases. For example, a dominant buyer can set meeting agendas or deliverable schedules that guide the process without excluding others.
- Reward power: Offer incentives that matter to the partner at critical stages. In the Information Search and Evaluation phases, a firm can promise volume commitments, co-marketing funds, or technical support to encourage the other party's input. Structuring attractive value-sharing (e.g. performance bonuses, preferred pricing) helps the partner to invest effort in joint decisions.
- Coercive power: Use sparingly as a last resort, typically at the final Choice stage. A strong party might reserve the right to impose penalties (e.g. price adjustments, limiting future deals) if agreements are not met. However, managers should weigh relational risks: clearly communicate any limits (e.g. 'we have alternative suppliers') but focus on using coercion only when necessary to resolve deadlocks.
- Referent power: Build and leverage trust from the very beginning. In early phases (Problem Recognition/Information Search), invest in relationship-building activities: co-develop visions, hold joint workshops, and engage respected leaders on both sides. Emphasise shared goals and

demonstrate reliability (e.g. meet deadlines), so that the partner naturally aligns with your preferences during trade-off discussions.

- Expert power: Mobilise technical know-how early. In Problem Recognition and Information Search, involve your top engineers or specialists in joint meetings; let them showcase expertise that defines the decision criteria. For example, hold technical review sessions where your experts lead discussions. In later Evaluation phases, offer training or joint R&D projects (e.g. prototyping collaborations) so the partner defers to your expertise when choosing final solutions.

Each of these tactics is phase-specific. For example, expert and referent strategies are most effective early, while legitimate and reward strategies shape the final outcomes.

The study's findings also highlight the importance of early involvement in decision-making processes, especially for companies with expert power. Managers should ensure that their specialised knowledge is integrated early on to influence key decisions effectively. Conversely, understanding when to exercise coercive or reward power can help in steering negotiations towards mutually beneficial outcomes without causing unnecessary conflicts. Finally, establishing clear governance structures and aligning strategic objectives are critical for managing power dynamics. Managers should focus on creating robust frameworks that support transparent and accountable decision-making processes. This approach will not only minimise conflicts but also pave the way for sustained collaboration and innovation in high-tech B2B partnerships.

Conclusion and future research

This study explored how power bases, involvement levels, and compromise dynamics shape joint decision-making in high-tech B2B relationships. The findings demonstrate that power is not static but fluid and context-dependent. Companies exercise different forms of power – expert, legitimate, coercive, reward – based on their strategic position, resource profile, and partnership context. Expertise stood out as a key power source, offering competitive advantage but also requiring continuous innovation. Meanwhile, legitimate and reward-based power supported trust and alignment, while coercive power reflected pressure-driven negotiations.

We found that involvement levels are deeply tied to power bases and significantly shape the nature of compromises: higher involvement often results in more complex and collaborative trade-offs, while lower involvement leads to simpler, more one-sided decisions. Firms align their power strategies with specific decision-making phases – expert and legitimate power are most effective early on, while coercive and reward power often appear in later stages. The interplay between power and involvement reveals how firms manage influence, control, and collaboration in uncertain and high-stakes B2B environments.

Theoretically, this research extends power dynamics frameworks by linking power bases with decision-making structure and compromise complexity. It contributes to Resource Dependence Theory and Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating how firms strategically mobilise power to shape outcomes beyond transactional dependencies. Practically, it provides diagnostic tools and managerial guidance for navigating power asymmetries in innovation-intensive sectors.

Recommendations for future studies

Future studies should explore how firms balance short-term bargaining power with long-term innovation and trust-building in B2B contexts. In particular, examining how power bases influence the willingness to compromise for sustained value creation could provide nuanced insights into collaborative resilience.

Moreover, governance structures deserve deeper attention. Their role in shaping power distribution, managing conflict, and fostering transparent decision-making is critical – especially when companies differ in size, culture, or strategic goals. Future research could investigate how formal and informal governance mechanisms moderate the relationship between power and decision-making outcomes.

Finally, further inquiry is needed into how companies actively shift power balances as a contingency strategy when alignment falters. This includes studying how firms renegotiate roles, recalibrate influence, and maintain collaboration under evolving conditions. Emphasising goal alignment, governance, power adaptation, and strategic flexibility will deepen our understanding of what enables successful and sustainable joint decision-making in B2B ecosystems.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the PPM-manajemen; Ministry of Finance Republic of Indonesia.

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