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What drives firm power across multiple levels of B2B analysis? Structured systematic literature review☆

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ABSTRACT

Firm power is a foundational concept in business-to-business (B2B) marketing, as it influences how resources and benefits are distributed across relationships. While the effects of power are well documented, the knowledge about power antecedents is less developed. Existing research often focuses on close cooperation between firms and resource dependency, overlooking the broader forces that increasingly influence power dynamics—such as geopolitical instability, agendas of NGOs, global health crises, sustainability pressures, or shifts in consumer expectations. This paper aims to broaden our understanding of what shapes firm power by systematically reviewing 110 empirical studies. Through a structured literature review, the findings are organized across five levels of analysis: Organizational, Inter-firm, Multi-tier, Ecosystem, and Macro. The review highlights a strong emphasis in existing research on firm-specific and dyadic factors, while broader, system-level influences remain underexplored—despite their growing relevance in today's volatile business environment. To help bridge this gap, the paper outlines key directions for future research. These include embracing multi-level and cross-disciplinary perspectives, paying more attention to non-traditional actors within business ecosystems, and using varied research methods like historical secondary data. By moving beyond narrow views of antecedents to power, this study encourages an approach that better reflects the complex realities firms face and offers useful analytical framework for both scholars and practitioners.

1. Introduction

Understanding firm power in business-to-business (B2B) context has been a key topic for decades, mainly because it's central to how companies manage their relationships and resources (Hopkinson & Blois, 2014; Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016; Wilkinson, 1979). Essentially, firm power influences how benefits—financial and other types—are shared between companies and their partners, affecting everything from negotiation outcomes and multidimensional value to partnership sustainability. The term itself refers to the capability of a business to force another business into doing something (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Mysen et al., 2012), and this is executed beyond use of contracts (Hausman & Johnston, 2010; Mishra & Banerjee, 2019). There is a rich empirical documentation that managing firm power effectively can lead to better performance, thus illustrating the central position of firm power concept in B2B marketing literature.

However, while antecedents to power and consequences of power are widely known, the research of antecedents to firm power is very fragmented. The research on antecedents to power are spread across very different layers of analysis like; resource dependence and inter-firm interactions on one side (Blois & Hopkinson, 2013; French & Raven, 1959a, 1959b; Hopkinson & Blois, 2014), and sustainable agenda (Glover, 2020), geopolitical tensions (Ravishankar et al., 2013), global pandemics (Arslan et al., 2022), technological innovations (Rashideh, 2020) on the other side. Therefore, there is a need for more nuanced and synthesized understanding of antecedents to firm power which would globally comprise these elements that managers may largely control and these factors that are rather to be "only" anticipated (Möller et al.,

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2020).

To fill this gap, this paper is generally oriented at summarizing research on factors influencing firm power across multiple levels of B2B system and stimulating further research in this area. Specifically regarding antecedents to firm power, we formulate detailed questions as follows:

- Which layers of analysis and antecedents have researchers focused on the most?
- What theories, methods, and contexts dominate prior research?
- What are the main gaps and promising future research directions?

To answer this question, the study employs a design of domain-based structured systematic literature review - SLR (Palmatier et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2023). The study presents detailed protocol of literature selection (Ashby et al., 2012; Fischl et al., 2014), exclusion strategy (Yang et al., 2021) the terms used by authors in relation to antecedents, further coding and generalizations.

This SLR offers framework categorizing findings into five levels: Organizational, Inter-firm, Multi-tier, Ecosystem, and Macro. The analysis, based on insights from 110 rigorously selected empirical studies, reveals that the majority of research has predominantly examined inter-firm dependence and various organizational resources as power antecedents. On the other side, interactions with non-business actors and broader macro factors received very limited attention, while some studies that looked at these levels identified very important antecedents, e.g. end consumer trends and geopolitical risks that resonate well with currently observed volatility in international environment. This paper concludes by proposing a detailed future research agenda. Key recommendations include adopting multi-level and cross-disciplinary theoretical approaches, exploring the role of non-traditional stakeholders within business ecosystems, and employing diverse methodologies—such as longitudinal studies, qualitative narratives, and secondary data analyses—to capture the dynamic and interconnected nature of antecedents to firm power. By addressing these suggested directions, future research can significantly enhance both theoretical understanding and practical management of firm power in complex B2B environments.

2. Antecedents to firm power in B2B relationships as research area

Firm power has long been a focal point in the marketing literature due to its role in distributing value among business buyers and sellers (Dowling, 1987; Weigand, 1973). Through last few decades the firm power received rich support as the factor driving financial and non-financial performance in B2B setting in several specific areas including international business (e.g. Andersson et al., 2007), marketing (Brennan et al., 2003), channels (Wilkinson, 1979), IMP (Guercini et al., 2024), operations management and supply chain management (e.g. Benton & Maloni, 2005; Ireland & Webb, 2007). Some researchers treat power as one of the governance mechanism in buyer-seller exchange, which underlines the central role of this construct in the literature (Bonatto et al., 2022; Caniëls & Gelderman, 2010; de Reuver & Bouwman, 2012), while the dominant perspective seems to distinguish between formal (contractual) and informal (relational) governance mechanisms (Cao & Lumineau, 2014). The power concept was used in some specific power-related conceptualizations such as: hegemony (Johnsen et al., 2020), asymmetry (Cuevas et al., 2015), autonomy (Newburry et al., 2003), positive and negative (dark) power (Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016; Ratnasingam, 2000), and abusive behavior (Kim et al., 2022).

While in economics the power, specifically firm "*market power*", is understood frequently as the market structure-related concept and measured through market share-based indicators only (Fujita, 1995; Melo et al., 2021; Röller & Sickles, 2000), in business studies there is a domination of behavioral understanding of firm power referring to firm either dominating or subordinative in B2B structures (Hingley et al., 2015; Hopkinson & Blois, 2014). Some studies distinguish coercive power from non-coercive power (e.g. Hausman & Johnston, 2010; Pfajfar et al., 2019) but the non-coercive power is just resource-related power potential (Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016), so coercive vs. non-coercive typology refers rather to different antecedents to power (Siemieniako, Mitręga, & Kubacki, 2022) and this typology is far from being universal (Blois & Hopkinson, 2013). Consequently, in this study we apply the definition of firm power as the ability of one organization to compel another to comply with it (Emerson, 1962; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Mysen et al., 2012).

While there is rich research on the consequences of firm power in various institutional contexts, there is only fragmented knowledge on how the power is built (Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016). This gap is becoming more pressing, because there is growing research into how organizations manipulate their resources to increase their power vis-à-vis dominant contractors (e.g. Lacoste & Johnsen, 2015; Tanskanen, 2015; Tokatli, 2007). Thus, the literature illustrates that the power is not only "side effect" of some other business strategies, but it may be strategically built. However, while some of power antecedents are directly controllable, there are some antecedents which are external factors that are "only" to anticipate. This is especially important, when we consider current volatility in international environments, i.e. macro drivers of firm power such as: sustainable agenda (Glover, 2020; Wei et al., 2023), post-colonial West-East tensions (Ravishankar et al., 2013), global pandemics and subsidizing (Arslan et al., 2022; Miocevic & Srhoj, 2023), technology innovations (Rashideh, 2020) and mass migration (Longoni et al., 2019). In some instances the macro trends are just "consumed" by key players which even strengthens existing power structures (Diprose et al., 2022; Glover & Touboulic, 2020), but sometimes these changes are utilized by previously weaker players to improve their position (Lechner et al., 2020). In short, when we consider antecedents to firm power at more than one level of analysis, there is a possibility to formulate new research questions. For example, when looking at the global outsourcing and offshoring in combination with competencies suppliers from emerging markets learned through these trends (Lechner et al., 2020), how does it influence on the power of these suppliers in international value chains? Taking into consideration rich research on antecedents to firm power that is potentially dispersed among various levels of analysis and the lack of systematic literature review on antecedents to firm power in B2B setting (compare Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016; Hopkinson & Blois, 2014), this study applies SLR methodology to synthesize antecedents to firm power located at multiple levels of B2B system.

3. Systemic framework on antecedents to firm power

The first step of our research design was to develop multi-level systems analytical framework that enable structured perspective on the occurrences happening within company and its environment (Karniouchina et al., 2013; Short et al., 2007). Such systemic perspective is advised for business-to-business research (Möller et al., 2020; Wilkinson, 2006). There are various propositions in the literature regarding how to partition B2B environment to analyze various levels at the same time, from somewhat classical macro-*meso*-micro (Sakarya et al., 2012; Siemieniako, Mitręga, & Kubacki, 2022) into complex; micro - lower meso - upper meso-macro (Möller et al., 2020). The increasing attention is given to the so-called ecosystems where focus is on interaction between business and non-business actors, e.g., technology providers, NGOs and local regulators (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017). Marttinen and Kähkönen (2022) explicitly suggested studying the sources of firm power in complex multi-tier systems by looking at 4 distinct levels, namely: focal company, first-tier supplier, lower-tier supplier and n-tier supplier. Taking this all into consideration, we make two assumptions in this study. First is that understanding complexity of antecedents to firm power in B2B setting demands looking at multiple levels of B2B system,

and second, that these levels may be operationalized into 5 interrelated but distinct levels: Organizational, Inter-firm, Multi-tier, Ecosystem and Macro. To make our operationalization transparent and replicable we elaborate on the distinctions between these levels and we present exemplary phenomena analyzed on each level in Table 1. While our systemic approach is not ideal which we further elaborate on the limitations section, we claim that it provides nuanced picture of antecedents to firm power. The specific contribution of this framework is that it draws attention to the extent to which given antecedents may be manageable versus anticipated only by the focal firm. The factors dispersed among 5 analytical levels are sorted by the extent of the "controllability": from Organizational level as most controllable into Macro level as the least controllable one. The framework as every other model being only a simplification of B2B reality (Iyer et al., 2015; Lundberg & Andresen, 2012) may help the managers to go beyond their cognitive limits and become more innovative by considering multiple dimensions that are understandable and therefore may be effectively combined by managers into their decision-making (Csaszar & Levinthal, 2016). While our framework does not indicate directly the interconnectivity between system levels, it illustrates the potential for exploring such connections and we provide the detailed research agenda regarding such connections in the final section of this manuscript.

4. Research design

There is a growing emphasis on rigorous reviews in various business disciplines: marketing (Hulland & Houston, 2020; Palmatier et al., 2018) international business (Paul & Criado, 2020) and B2B relationships (e.g., Bouazzaoui et al., 2020; Lacka et al., 2020; Siemieniako, Mitręga, & Kubacki, 2022). Systematic reviews or SLRs, a stringent method of evidence synthesis, integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches to enhance conventional narrative literature reviews. Appropriately conducted SLRs are characterized by replicability, i.e. through presentation of detailed protocol of literature selection (Ashby et al., 2012; Fischl et al., 2014) and minimized bias, i.e. by defining and excluding some keywords (Yang et al., 2021). Applying such methodology enables mapping current state of knowledge in the area and building detailed future research agenda (Kraus et al., 2020; Paul & Criado, 2020; Wang et al., 2019). However, there are several legitimate types of SLRs including traditional descriptive SLRs, meta-analyses, scoping reviews, structured reviews, and reviews of reviews (tertiary reviews) (Ali et al., 2017; Kache & Seuring, 2014; Kemper et al., 2011; Paul et al., 2023). As our review is not limited to any specific theory and research method, and the framework-based reviews tend to be more robust and impactful (Paul et al., 2023), we apply a design of domain-based structured SLR (Palmatier et al., 2018). Specifically, we combine the TCM framework (theories-contexts-methods) that was documented as an effective analytical tool for providing further research directions (Paul et al., 2017; Paul & Criado, 2020) with the multi-level framework (Table 1) that we developed in correspondence with the literature to systematically analyze antecedents to power positioned at various levels of B2B system.

Following literature (Paul et al., 2021; Paul & Criado, 2020) we were very careful in selecting our keywords strategy. Inspired by prior SLRs on antecedents to industrial marketing phenomena (e.g. Sandberg & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2014; Siemieniako, Mitręga, & Kubacki, 2022) we initially selected working definitions of our key concepts: *antecedents, firm power and B2B relationships.* We adopted Sharma's (2020) understanding of *antecedents* as inputs or stimuli. Specifically, we treated antecedents as all factors either facilitating or restraining power of focal firm in relation to their business counterparts. In line with previously discussed review of power literature, we applied broad definition of *firm power* as the ability of one organization to compel another to comply with it (Emerson, 1962; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Mysen et al., 2012). We also assumed that the term *B2B relationships* as the context of our research refers to all direct upstream and downstream collaborations that the focal company may use for its business purposes.

Importantly, this study focuses on firm power within business network instead of some other possible conceptualization, e.g. power of business net (Möller et al., 2005), while at the same this study focuses on antecedents to such firm power beyond its direct connections and it includes indirect higher tier connections, as well as interactions with non-business organizations and "anonymous" macro environment (see framework in Table 1). As explained in earlier section such multi-level perspective applied in our SLR was to enhance systemic understanding of antecedents to firm power, especially in terms the diverse level of their controllability.

At the beginning of 2024, we used the Scopus database to retrieve all publications in the area of business or economics that could potentially focus on the topic of firm power in B2B relationships. Here, we present the exact search string to assure replicability of our SLR (Palmatier et al., 2018): TITLE-ABS-KEY (("business relationship*" AND power) OR (allianc* AND power) OR ("business network*" AND power) OR ("business buyer" AND power) OR (supplier AND power) OR ("business customer" AND power) OR ("supply chain" AND power) OR (partnership* AND power) OR (inter-firm AND power) OR (inter-organizational AND power) OR ("buyer-seller relationship*" AND power) OR ("joint venture*" AND power)). AND PUBYEAR >1964 AND PUBYEAR <2024 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "ECON")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO

Table 1
The analytical levels of antecedents to firm power in B2B context.

Level	Definition	Exemplary phenomena
Organizational	The features of the focal firm and the processes that happen inside this organization, including interpersonal phenomena that impact on firm power (see also in Marttinen & Kähkönen, 2022).	Big global brands usually orchestrate the whole international value chains (upstream and downstream); Social capital accumulated by the actor in the focal firm builds power of the focal firm if such personal connections are valued by firm's partner
Inter-firm	The phenomena positioned in direct interactions/relations between two or more collaborating firms that create power imbalances between them (compare with Marttinen & Kähkönen, 2022; Ford et al., 2011).	The knowledge transfer from focal firm to its counterpart may bring bargaining leverage to them; The firms may sign a contract that create specific penalties that focal firm may use against its counterparts
Multi-tier	The phenomena positioned in indirect interactions/relations between focal firm and its higher tier counterparts that increase or decrease power of the focal firm (see also in Marttinen & Kähkönen, 2022; Ford et al., 2011).	Alliancing with competitor of business partner may increase the power of the focal company; Building dense connections in supply chain (central network position) creates the leverage vis-à-vis poorly connected counterparts
Ecosystem	The phenomena positioned in relationships between focal firm and non-business actors (e.g., NGOs, regulators, technological platforms) that impact on the power of focal firm. (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017)	The media activities of some NGOs that legitimize some supply strategies while delegitimize other strategies and its impacts on power of companies using these strategies and their suppliers
Macro	The tendencies in the "classical" macro-sphere environment with their impacts on the power of focal firm in B2B relationships (one-directional influences mostly) (Sakarya et al., 2012; Siemieniako, Mitręga, & Kubacki, 2022).	PEST (political, economic, social, technological) changes, e.g. growing terrorist risks in some regions decrease bargaining power of suppliers from these regions

(LANGUAGE, "English")).

Our search resulted initially in 5558 documents, while this number was downsized due to applying journal quality criterion (Paul & Criado, 2020), specifically narrowing to all journals that received at least 3* in the Association of Business Schools (ABS) ranking (see flowchart at Fig. 1). However, to avoid excluding too many studies that were published in lower rank journals we consulted 3 established professor in industrial marketing with regard to nominate some journals below ABS 3* that should be included. Due to their suggestion we included two journals that have long tradition on publishing rigorous studies explicitly in B2B marketing field: Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing and Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing which increased our sample by 61 potentially relevant papers.

In the second phase, all 1966 abstracts of papers were read, which allowed for eliminating 1224 papers that did not focus on the firm power in B2B relations. Finally, the remaining 742 papers were fully read, which resulted in the retention of 110 papers for further analytical steps. We did not differentiate between any particular research method for inclusion criteria. However, we excluded non-empirical papers from our review as it would be difficult to combine them with empirical papers and some SLR's guidance suggest rather focusing on empirical to provide evidence-based state of research in the area (Durach et al., 2017; Tranfield et al., 2003).[1] Importantly, as our review is driven by 5-level analytical framework (Table 1), we excluded all studies that narrowly focused on antecedents to firm power classified at one level only. Other exclusion criteria were: the focus on "statistical power" on one hand and "energy-related power" in the initial set of papers. Finally, we have excluded from our review all papers that focused on firm power antecedents in terms of coercive vs. non-coercive power concepts (and their detailed types) as long as the antecedents to power or "power types" were positioned there as inter-firm relevant phenomena only (e.g., Clauss & Bouncken, 2019; Fu et al., 2020; Zhang & Watson IV, 2020). At the end of the process of papers' selection we consulted again 3 professors from the area regarding some potential papers that we should include ex-post that were likely within the scope of our review but could be dismissed due to some potential selection biases (Grewal et al., 2018), e.g. keywords used. These experts suggested including 2 papers additionally (Blois, 2009; Blois & Hopkinson, 2013). However, our analysis revealed that these two papers were non-empirical papers, so the final dataset remained at the number of 110 papers. We incorporated conceptual and epistemological insights from these papers into the future research agenda we present at the end of the paper.

A dedicated form was developed in an Excel spreadsheet to extract data for analysis (Nguyen et al., 2018). To ensure inter-rater reliability (Belur et al., 2018), we randomly selected 3 papers, and each research team member coded them separately. The team discussed and calibrated the coding inconsistencies that emerged at this stage. During the coding of another set of 3 randomly selected papers, there were no significant differences in the coding process. Following a multi-stage analytical approach, we combined deductive and inductive coding (Sandberg & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2014). The 5-levels framework drove assigning each identified antecedent to given level of analysis. However, we initially coded all of the antecedents found in the literature inductively, i.e., following the categories used by the authors themselves (see coding stages at Fig. 1). Finally, to keep the coding process transparent (Palmatier et al., 2018), we developed coding illustrations for every antecedent at each analytical level with associated generalizations (compare all antecedents' tables).

[1] While we excluded 5 non-empirical research papers from our review, we reviewed them separately. These papers stress existence of antecedents dispersed across 3 levels; organizational, inter-firm (dyadic), and multi-tier (network) (Crook & Combs, 2007; Inkpen & Beamish, 1997; Blois & Hopkinson, 2013; Ireland & Webb, 2007). Blois (2009) emphasize the role of perception of legitimacy of power in B2B relationships. In short, these papers stimulated probably some further research on antecedents to firm power, but are not contrasting with our research results and they do not take into consideration the ecosystem and macro level of analysis.

5. Descriptive analysis of the literature

This section provides an overview of the 110 studies identified in our SLR focusing on antecedents to firm power across multiple levels of systematic analysis. Our descriptive analysis provides information about the journals that published the articles, the year of publication, the research method used, the research tradition used in the studies, and the countries where the studies have been performed. This section maps the existing literature in the synthesized way, while the reader may also check additional information, especially tables with detailed data, presented in the appendix.

5.1. Journals and year of publication

The 110 sampled articles have been published in 53 different scientific journals in the fields of business and economics (Table 2 in appendix). However, five journals concentrated around 39 % of all articles published: Supply Chain Management (15 articles), Industrial Marketing Management (10 articles), Journal of Purchasing and Supply Chain Management (7 articles), Journal of Business Research (6 articles) and the International Journal of Operations and Production Management (5 articles). This result is not a surprise since the first three journals have a long tradition of publishing studies on interorganizational relationships. Noteworthy, about 14 % of the articles were published in Supply Chain Management, a journal rated ABS 4 which illustrates this topic being widely accepted in the international academia.

We also observed that interest in this research area has noticeably grown in recent years (see Fig. 2 in the appendix). While the earliest article in our sample dates back to 1987, nearly 38.2 % of the publications appeared between 2019 and 2023. Notably, 2020 and 2023 stand out as the most prolific years. Overall, our review points to a steady and consistent increase in the number of publications over time, suggesting that the field has gradually matured over the past three decades.

5.2. Theories and focal organizations

Our analysis shows that only a few studies in our dataset used concrete theory to analyze antecedents to firm's power (table 3 in the appendix). We found that resource dependence theory (RDT) was used most frequently, institutional theory and transaction costs theory (TCT) were also used few times, but in general investigated studies seem to be driven by empirical observations only which may be treated as a gap in this research area.

As our research questions were raised in the context of B2B relationships and these structures are conceptualized and studied in diverse way (Guercini et al., 2024; Möller et al., 2005), it was important for us to check if these studies identify so-called focal organization within these structures. We could not identify a focal organization only in 33 studies (30 %). Many studies, around 31 % of the papers, focused on the buying organization as a focal organization (table 4, appendix). These companies are usually big corporations, playing central roles in supply chains. Around 16 % of the studies took the supplier's perspective, while other types of actors in business ecosystems were rarely focused on. This result suggests that the suppliers perspective and perspective of non-business actors are relatively underrepresented.

5.3. Research methods and investigated countries

Considering the authors' avoidance of using concrete theories in research design, it is not surprising that the case study was the most used method in the sampled articles (Table 5, appendix). A total of 41 articles were just single case studies, and 29 other articles reported multiple case

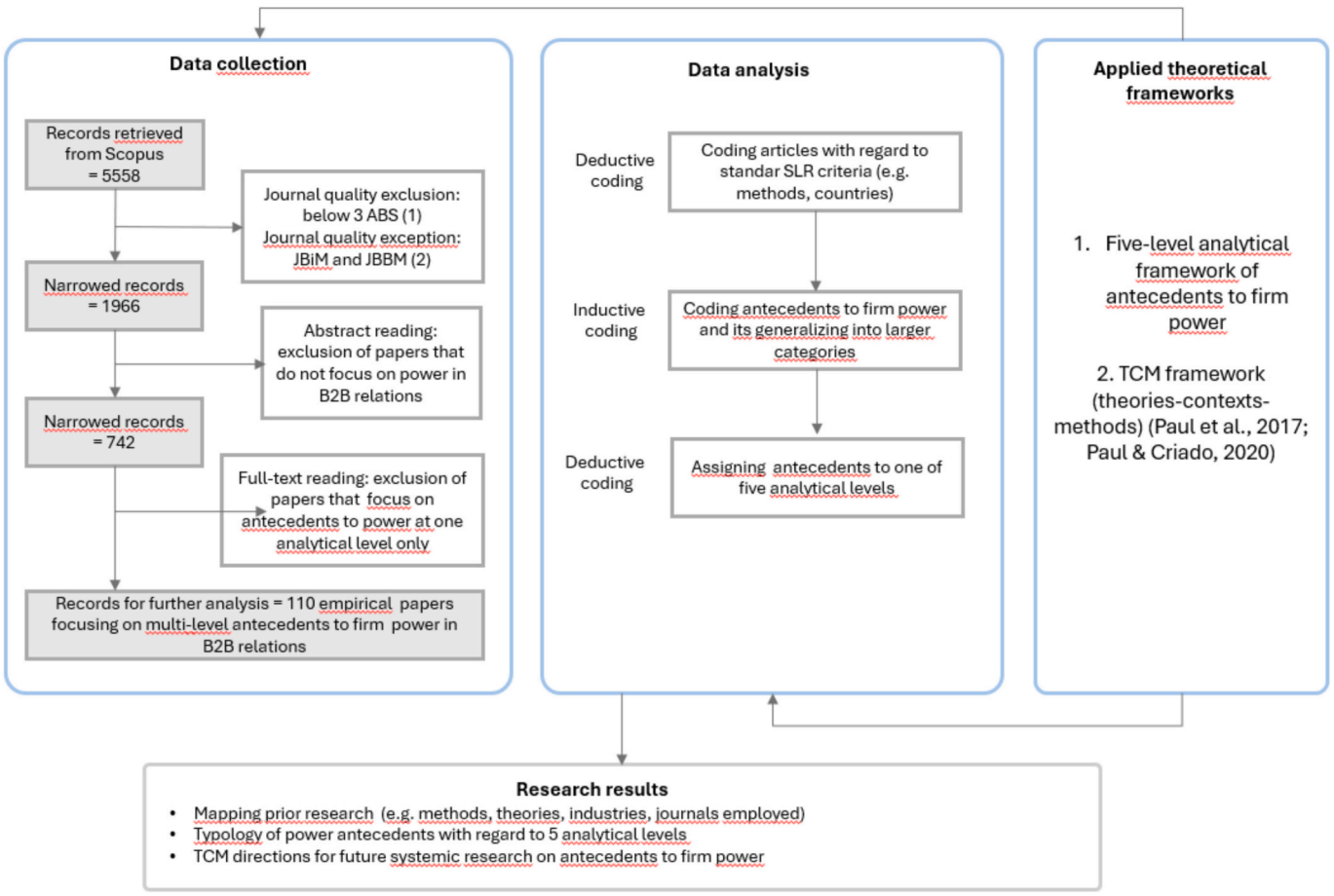

Fig. 1. Systematic review flowchart.

studies. Noteworthy, sixteen of these studies use longitudinal data. While quantitative studies were not frequent, some of them used surveys (e.g., Chamanara et al., 2023; Yaroson et al., 2023; Roy et al. (2023), while other used experiments (e.g., Muller et al., 2017), or panel data (e.g., Lavie, 2007). The dominance of non-quantitative studies goes hand in hand with the explorative character of theory development and in spite of large amount of accumulated empirical data, suggests that this area is far from maturity.

Most studies used data from high-income countries like the United Kingdom (17 studies – 15.5 %), the United States (6 studies – 5.5 %) or Finland (4 studies – 3.6 %). Among middle-income countries used as the context for data collection, there were, for example, China (4 studies – 3.6 %), Bangladesh (1 study – 0.9 %) and Brazil (1 study – 0.9 %). Other 22 studies (20 %) have been performed with samples or cases from multiple countries. Noteworthy, our review shows that a significant number of studies (21 studies – 19.1 %) do not report where the research has been performed (Table 6). We identified only a very small number of studies from developing countries (12 studies – 10.9 %), which represents a clear research gap.

6. Antecedents to firm power across multiple levels of B2B system

This section presents and structures the antecedents to firm power coded from 110 empirical articles in our final sample. In our data analysis we combined inductive and deductive coding as previously described with more details in the research design section. Below, we describe the antecedents classified separately at each analytical level. Additionally, in the appendix we present the detailed tables where categories at each level are defined and characterized by the number of empirical mentions, exemplary quotations and exemplary references from our dataset. We will finalize this section by graphical presentation of all power antecedents combined across 5 levels.

6.1. Organizational antecedents to firm power

In this section we present only these antecedents that were associate with Organizational level understood as the characteristics of the focal firm and characteristics of processes that happen inside this organization, including interpersonal phenomena that their impact on firm power. By reviewing 110 studies, we identified 171 pieces of evidence that refer to organizational power sources used to influence or change the behavior of business partners. These power antecedents were further grouped into 8 categories (Table 7, in the appendix).

Unsurprisingly, ***organizational size*** (40 citations), organizational knowledge and expertise (33 citations), and resources and capabilities (32 citations) are the most common sources of organizational power. For instance, Doran et al. (2005) explore buyer-supplier relationships within a service sector context and show that *"all suppliers view Insurance plc as an important customer and wish the business to continue. (…) Insurance plc is the largest life and general insurer in the UK, insuring around a quarter of UK homes and a fifth of UK cars"*. The size makes organizations more valuable partners and can, therefore, be used to get better conditions or commit contractors to specific requests.

Organizations also use ***knowledge and expertise*** to demonstrate and exercise power. Knowledge as a power source can even reduce the relevance of size and offer advantages to small companies in relationships with larger counterparts. For example, Oukes et al. (2019) show that power is key in the relationships between startups and established organizations. The startup they analyzed uses its technical expertise to

develop new technologies as a source of power to negotiate with the established organization. The latter counterbalances this source of power by using its experience with government-funded projects to successfully apply for funding together with the startup. Several other articles show how organizations use their accumulated knowledge and expertise as a power source, e.g., knowledge about market conditions (Kahkonen, 2013; Kahkonen & Virolainen, 2011), operational techniques (Siemieniako et al., 2023), or technological know-how (Tregaskis, 2003).

Distinctive ***resources and capabilities*** are widely evidenced as the power antecedent and these refers for example to the ability to innovate (Vagneron et al., 2009), the ability to configure resources and activities (Olsen et al., 2014), exclusive access to information (Sahaym et al., 2023) and financial resources (Mugo et al., 2022). These res enable organizations to exert influence over their partners. These resources make an organization more attractive and, in many cases, irreplaceable within certain value chains, serving as tools to negotiate favourable terms, steer decisions, or coordinate joint actions.

Other organizational sources of power are also repeatedly mentioned in the sampled articles and these refer especially to ***reputation and status*** (e.g., Meehan & Wright, 2012; Luo et al., 2023; Johnsen et al., 2019; Pazirandeh & Norrman, 2013; Coveri et al. (2022)), ***networking strategy*** (Dowling, 1987; Finne et al., 2014; Horak & Long, 2018; Li et al., 2011; Mosch et al., 2021), ***innovation and technology*** (Dalenogare et al., 2023; Finne et al., 2014; Keegan et al., 2022; Kulmala, 2004; Kuo, 2017), ***individual knowledge and expertise*** (Horak & Long, 2018; Matheus et al., 2016; Meehan & Wright, 2012; Suvanto & Lahdesmaki, 2023; Vafeas et al., 2016) and ***personal social capital and boundary spanner*** (Grabs & Carodenuto, 2021; Hawkins et al., 2014; Meehan & Wright, 2012; Siemieniako et al., 2023; Vlachos & Dyra, 2020). Importantly, while all of these factors were classified in our study as organizational antecedents to power, two last of them refer actually to intra-organizational phenomena, so they could be potentially treated separatelly providing even more nuanced picture of antecedents to firm power and opening other directions of analysis. We will elaborate more on this aspect in the last chapter of the manuscript, especially in the limitations section.

6.2. Interfirm antecedents to firm power

In this section we present only antecedents classified as inter-firm, specifically the phenomena positioned in direct interactions/relations between two or more collaborating firms that create power between them. We identified 145 pieces of evidence across our dataset referring to antecedents to firm power positioned on inter-firm level (see table 8 in the appendix). ***Dependence*** is by far the most common interfirm antecedent mentioned in the sampled articles (43 citations), which illustrates the importance of the Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) (Mosch et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021; Sinkovics et al., 2018; Tregaskis, 2003) as most commonly used theory in our dataset. Business partners that perceive their activities as depend on specific raw materials, components, products, services, or market access offered by other organizations must submit to these organizations. For instance, Elg and Johansson (1997) argue that major Swedish manufacturers face marked dependence since they must sell their products to three wholesalers to achieve sufficient market coverage. A similar situation regarding dominating supermarkets is reported by Sutton-Brady, Kamvounias and Taylor, 2015 in the Australian context.

Except perceived dependence that is a very general factor, our dataset pointed at some specific inter-firm conditions and partners' behaviours that create power: ***partners control practices*** (Johnsen et al., 2019; Meqdadi et al., 2018; Rindt & Mouzas, 2015; Sanderson, 2004; Suvanto & Lahdesmaki, 2023), ***sanctions and rewards*** (Bayne et al., 2019; Fu et al., 2020; Handley & Benton Jr, 2012a, 2012b; Horak & Long, 2018; Vlachos & Dyra, 2020) ***switching costs and non-substitutability*** (Mena et al., 2013; Reekers & Smithson, 1996; Sinkovics et al., 2018; Sutton-Brady, Kamvounias and Taylor, 2015; Tanskanen, 2015), contracts (Devin & Richards, 2016; Keegan et al., 2022; Li et al., 2011; Meehan & Wright, 2012; Vlachos & Dyra, 2020), and ***information asymmetry*** (Mosch et al., 2021; Patel-Campillo, 2010; Rehme et al., 2015; Sanderson, 2004; Siemieniako & Mitrega, 2017).

However, the analyzed studies provide rich evidence for some subtle non-coercive tactics that create power in B2B relationships. By strengthening relationships, ***trust and inter-firm social capital*** (Finne et al., 2014; Vlachos & Dyra, 2020; Siemieniako et al., 2023; Keegan et al., 2022; Marttinen & Kähkönen, 2022) organizations can enforce favourable behavior as their partners become usually committed to the relationship continuance. Another interesting tactic in this area refers to ***supporting partners and transferring knowledge***. Studies show that by sharing their knowledge resources (Tregaskis, 2003), educating suppliers (Hart & Saunders, 1997), sending experts (Usui et al., 2017), and offering support (Fu et al., 2020), companies can get their partners' commitment and engaged with expected behavior. Similarly, various forms of ***investing in partners*** is reported by some studies (Johnsen et al., 2019; Kuo, 2017; Lebedev et al., 2020; Siemieniako & Mitrega, 2017) as a form of creating power imbalance through showing commitment and building pressure for specific reciprocal behaviours.

6.3. Multi-tier antecedents to power

In this section we focus only on multi-tier level antecedents defined as the phenomena positioned in indirect interactions/relations between focal firm and its higher tier counterparts that increase or decrease power of the focal firm. Although multi-tier antecedents were found as less common than organizational and interfirm factors, we identified 62 pieces of evidence regarding this analytical level. This evidence was then organized into seven categories (see Table 9, appendix). Thirty-nine articles highlighted ***network position*** as antecedent to power used by organizations (e.g., Chamanara et al., 2023; Ford & Gillan, 2021; Horak & Long, 2018; Mendonça & Adăscăliței, 2020; Parviziomran & Elliot, 2023). For instance, Horak and Long (2018) studied Toyota's supplier network and concluded that the Japanese carmaker is positioned in the center of the network rather than at the top. Even without a formal hierarchy, such network position guarantees the ability to control other network actors (Horak & Long, 2018).

Another multi-tier factor is ***network structure*** (Elg & Johansson, 1997; Oukes et al., 2019; Parviziomran & Elliot, 2023; Sinkovics et al., 2018). It refers rather to the whole business network structure and not just to the network position of a particular organization. For example, the buyer's bargaining power typically increases when suppliers have fewer connections within the network (Parviziomran & Elliot, 2023).

Fostering collective actions has stood out as another less common power antecedent (e.g., Elg & Johansson, 1997; Matheus et al., 2016; Pfaff et al., 2023; Rindt & Mouzas, 2015; Suvanto & Lahdesmaki, 2023) In the article by Rindt and Mouzas (2015), for example, the authors investigate the creation of codes of conduct and trading conditions for a group of companies that allow for exercising power. Several other specific, but rarely used, multi-tier antecedents have been identified in our review. For instance, Mosch et al. (2021) show how large Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) expand their power by ***creating an ecosystem*** where they fully captivate their customers. Other studies pointed out at other interesting multi-tier laverages such as ***alliancing with partner's competitors*** (Lavie, 2007), ***network resources*** (Luo et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2006; Zeng et al., 2017) and introducing ***supply-wide performance measures*** (Matheus et al., 2016).

6.4. Ecosystem antecedents to power

Ecosystem antecedents refer to the phenomena positioned in relationships between focal firm and non-business actors (e.g., NGOs, regulators, technological platforms) that impact on the power of focal firm. Our review demonstrates that these factors are under-researched in

the extant literature, while we have identified 15 pieces of evidence that refer to this level of analysis. Specifically, ***The state and entities' influence*** (Ford & Gillan, 2021; Pazirandeh & Norrman, 2013; Sanderson, 1999), ***media and NGOs' legitimacy*** (Chamanara et al., 2023; Rindt & Mouzas, 2015), ***technological artifacts*** (Dalenogare et al., 2023; Elg & Johansson, 1997; Roeck et al., 2019) and ***multi-stakeholders social capital*** (Zeng et al., 2017) are factors we classified as ecosystem antecedents (table 10, appendix).

The phenomena that were associated with ecosystem level emphasize the importance of non-business actors and encourage future research, including some studies on firm power conducted explicitly from the perspective of non-business organizational as focal actors. For illustration, Chamanara et al. (2023) provided the evidence for NGOs as important source of legitimacy for certain supply chain actions. Similarly, Rindt and Mouzas (2015) found that German retailers are subject to the attention of media and NGOs and, therefore, follow some practices they would otherwise ignore. Finally, technological artifacts like distributed ledger technology (Roeck et al., 2019) can change information asymmetry or confer transparency to value-chain members, changing the power imbalances.

6.5. Macro antecedents to power

Finally, macro analytical level refers to the tendencies in the "classical" macro-sphere environment with their impacts on the power of focal firm in B2B relationships (one-directional influences mostly).The articles in our sample show 37 pieces of evidence referring to macro factors, which we grouped into six categories (Table 11, appendix). The most common are ***policies and regulation*** (e.g. Pazirandeh & Norrman, 2013; Sanderson, 1999; Siemieniako et al., 2023; Nisim & Benjamin, 2008; Yaroson et al., 2023; Longoni et al. (2019), and ***end consumer trends*** (e.g. Brookes, 1995; Mosch et al., 2021; Rindt & Mouzas, 2015), while among other less common factors we distinguish between: ***competitive intensity*** (e.g. Muller et al., 2017), ***cultural aspects*** (e.g. Hawkins et al., 2014), ***political risk*** (e.g. Sinkovics et al., 2018), and ***changing technological paradigms*** (Oliveira et al., 2021).

To illustrate this important level of power antecedents, one may take into consideration the study by Nisim and Benjamin (2008) where inclination of government to impose tenders as obligatory for some services facilitate bigger firms in some industries. On the other hand, end consumer trends also influence on the power asymmetry. Companies can strategically use knowledge about consumer expectations to exert pressure and gain leverage over partners. For instance, Muller et al. (2017) highlight that consumers increasingly look for information about where their food comes from and how it was produced, allowing retailers and food processors to put more pressure on their suppliers. In the similar fashion, Ireland (2004) shows how companies in the construction industry refer to the highly competitive and uncertain environment in this industry to press their supply partners. Interestingly, Sinkovics et al. (2018) showcase how country instability affects the organizations that negotiate with international partners. For instance, they mention that terror attacks by Islamic extremists in Bangladesh have created security concerns for foreign buyers and resulted in fewer factory visits, negatively affecting the power of local organizations. Khakhar and Rammal (2013) refer to a similar situation in the Arab countries. Finally, the study by Oliveira et al. (2021) illustrates the importance of changing technological paradigms because value chain digitization impacts on power asymmetry between traditional partners. Organizations that easily adapt to the changing technological paradigm have more power than those that struggle to adapt.

7. Research synthesis and discussion

In previous sections we presented how all antecedents to power found in previous studies are associated with five analytical levels separately. In this section we map all of these antecedents together. Specifically, Fig. 2 presents previously mentioned antecedent categories marked by various shades of gray corresponding to the number of empirical literature references. Therefore, Fig. 2 enables fast overview regarding not only which analytical level dominated in previous research but also which particular antecedent category across levels was less or more frequently supported empirically. Noteworthy, the fact that one category is more visible in the literature so far does not equal most impactful in the sense of relative causality (e.g. like in traditional regression model). There were no empirical studies so far that really took into consideration all or even most of these factors together which could illuminate on such relative importance. However, the figure clearly pictures attention given by scholars to particular aspects so far.

The research on power antecedents is clearly dominated by the research on organizational and inter-firm level with significant attention given to the multi-tier level, whereas macro-level of analysis and especially ecosystem level were largely neglected by the literature. On the other hand, our review provides that antecedents to firm power in B2B relationships are indeed dispersed across the whole B2B multi-layer system and therefore it answers the recent suggestion to deepen the understanding of relations between single business actors and its complex environment (Möller et al., 2020).

Our results corresponds with and extends previous call to go beyond original "power bases" typology (French & Raven, 1959a, 1959b) in B2B research (Blois & Hopkinson, 2013; Hopkinson & Blois, 2014). While these "power bases" related to coercive vs. non-coercive dichotomy remain still very popular in B2B research, our review demonstrates that this framework motivates very narrow research on the origins of the firm power, which may slow down the knowledge for this complex area. Namely, antecedents of firm power conceptualized from this framework does not go beyond inter-firm level of analysis as they generally refer to some resources being used by partners to enforce each other's behavior. Additionally, our review demonstrates that some aspects that were traditionally perceived as non-coercive power antecedents such as building trust with business partners may be strategically used to create partners' dependence and utilize it which could be interpreted rather as coercive influence.

While the majority of the studies we analyzed pointed at antecedents to firm power at only two analytical levels (i.e. mostly inter-firm and organizational), there were some studies that looked at this problem through three and even four analytical levels (e.g. Patnaik et al., 2020; Pazirandeh & Norrman, 2013; Sinkovics et al., 2018). These studies provide strong evidence that the antecedents to firm power may form complex trajectories, where factors being largely controlled by the focal company interplay with the factors beyond such control. However, it does not mean that the focal company cannot introduce some tactics to strengthen its position in such complicated environment. On the contrary, prior research suggests that such strategic attempts may indeed appear successful for both smaller buyers (Pazirandeh & Norrman, 2013) and smaller suppliers (Sinkovics et al., 2018). Therefore, while the analytical framework we used in this review enables presenting antecedents to firm power at five levels with diverse level of managerial controllability, its utilization, either in academic research or business practice, does not mean the acceptance of power status quo, i.e. weaker staying legitimately subservient as long as accepting some benefits (Blois, 2009, 2010).

8. Future research agenda

The multi-level perspective employed in this review appears to work well with empirical evidence extracted from 110 papers published in well recognizable journals. Although this data is primarily generated in an exploratory manner, which limits generalizations, it creates opportunities for further studies employing diverse research designs, enhancing our understanding of how firm power is established in B2B relationships. In light of the research gaps previously addressed, we will now utilize the TCM framework (Paul et al., 2017) to outline a

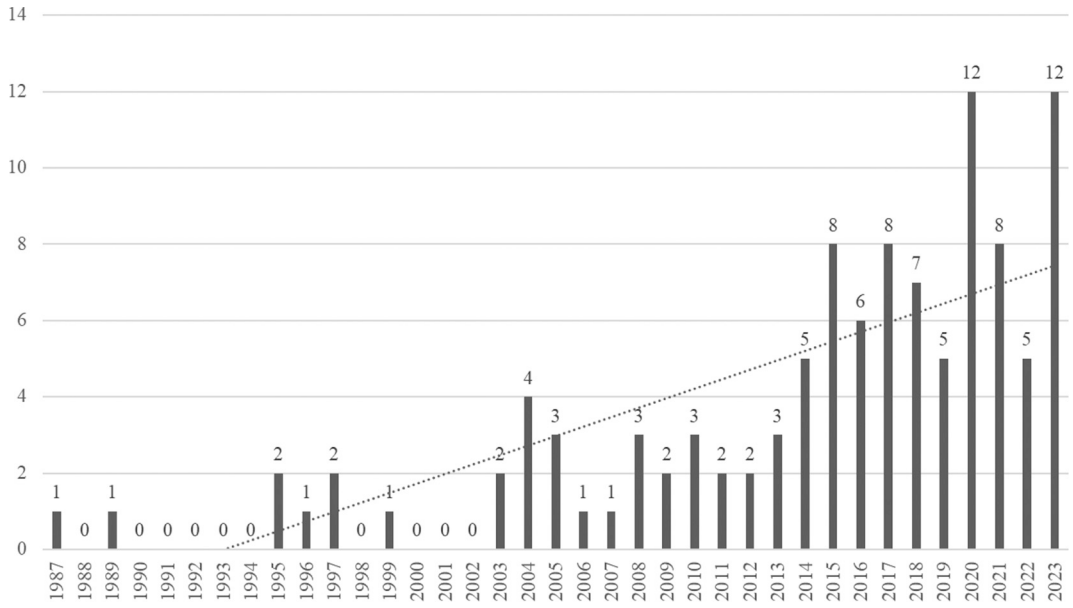

Fig. 2. Multi-level antecedents to firm power in B2B relationships.

comprehensive agenda for future study. Table 12 provides an instant overview of the subject.

8.1. Theory

Future research should embrace potential conceptual inconsistencies that limit and multi-level theorizing (Raisch et al., 2009). For example, our study illustrates that dependence received the strongest support as the inter-firm antecedent aligned with popularity of resource dependence theory (RDT) in relation to various levels of analysis. However, when looking at the way studies measure dependence vis-à-vis power, this causal link looks a bit tautological. In general, it is not uncommon to see the treatment of dependence and power as synonyms, which brings dangerous ambiguity around a focal construct (Post et al., 2020). Similarly, it was not uncommon in our dataset to find some studies that instead of focusing on antecedents to power, focused on antecedents to various forms of power inspired by original typology by French and Raven (1959a, 1959b). In line with previous literature calls (Blois & Hopkinson, 2013; Hopkinson & Blois, 2014), this review questions such approach and suggests future research should be more careful when defining key constructs, including firm power as a focal construct.

While our review reveals that existing research on power antecedents focuses mostly on antecedents located at organizational and inter-firm level, we found some instances of studies that consider antecedents from 3 and 4 analytical levels which shows the potential direction to explore and theorize about how links between such factors interplay and shift power between partners in time. While such dynamics was not necessarily in explicit focus of prior studies, one can interpret from presented research results. For example, the study by Sinkovics et al. (2018) illustrates how small suppliers from developing country strengthen their international position by adjusting to environmental trends, developing own capabilities, building trust and reputation in their partnerships, while also become restricted by political instability in their region with negative consequences on their power position. While such dynamics may not be generalizable to other research setting, it shows the potential to explicitly focus more on these links in future research. It could be possible to identify some typical causal trajectories, recursive connections (reverse changes) regarding power shifts and its implications on the performance of the focal company or several cooperating firms.

The theory is largely absent in prior research on multi-level antecedents, so future research may be strengthen by the multiparadigm research that involves utilizing different theoretical frameworks to collect and analyze data, thus fostering diverse representations of the phenomenon under study (Lewis & Grimes, 1999). Such approach can be either in parallel or sequentially (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Parallel studies may highlight and preserve theoretical conflicts by presenting contrasting aspects of the power antecedents through different theoretical lenses. Sequential studies, conversely, could build upon each other, with insights from one paradigm-specific study on power antecedents informing subsequent research endeavors. Here we would like to indicate rare examples of using multiple theories in our dataset (Reekers & Smithson, 1996; Vlachos & Dyra, 2020). Here we emphasize the potential to combine resource dependence theory, transaction cost economics, and resource based-view with theories that look at larger social structures, e.g. institutional theory and structural theory (Orru et al., 1989; Mitręga, 2023).

Despite the potential advantages offered by this approach, integrating two or more research levels has been deemed somewhat challenging (Huber, 1991), often resulting in a preference for one level over another in research. Social theorists have long grappled with the difficulty of connecting micro-level actions to macro-level structures (Coleman, 1986), and attempts to reconcile this paradox in individual theory have frequently faltered (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 568). In their examination of levels of analysis in B2B marketing research, Wilke and Ritter (2006) highlight the issue of defining causality in terms of the interaction between micro and macro levels. Consequently, models focusing on reciprocal interaction between two levels of analysis, such as between the antecedents to firm power on organizational level and the antecedents on multi-tier level, may be presented in further research sometimes as conceptual maps, contextual understandings or metaphors rather than precise theories with hierarchically organized hypotheses (Abbot, 1995). As an example of such approach one may use "organizational drivetrain" metaphor by Di Stefano et al. (2014). In the context of firm power, one can also refer to the symbolism of interlocking gears used by Siemieniako et al. to explain (Siemieniako et al., 2023) to explain power dynamics in complex B2B ecosystem.

8.2. Context

Considering where the empirical data was collected, our review provides that prior studies on antecedents to firm power are dominated

Table 12
Future research framework.

Theory	**Conceptual challenges** *Problem:* Either power antecedents or power itself are defined in unclear manner, which makes them difficult to operationalize and study,. e. g. the link between firm dependence and firm power is one most studied causal links but it appears largely tautological. *Solution:* Providing the definitions to antecedents dispersed along multiple levels without blurring the focal construct o power. **Power dynamics** *Problem:* If we study antecedents to power across analytical levels in isolation, we may underestimate dynamics that happens through links between these factors. *Solution:* Focusing explicitly on the power dynamics between cooperating firms by identifying the links between antecedents across from various levels. **Multi-paradigm research** *Problem:* Some theories tend to focus on only one analytical level (e.g. transaction cost economics), so it limits multi-level understanding. *Solution:* Applying multi-theory approach either in parallel or sequentially **Metaphors and conceptual maps** *Problem:* Studying antecedents to firm power across multiple levels may be difficult through traditional research hypotheses and their presentation. *Solution:* The use of metaphors at various research stages may help in understanding connections that are unclear or too complex.
Context	**Developing countries and historical context** *Problem:* Too much light is given to companies from most developed countries which limits our understanding of power shifts and hinders science's societal impact, i.e. contributing to more sustainable and inclusive global development *Solution:* Incorporating perspective of firms originating from traditionally dependent regions and their historical context. **Geopolitical changes** *Problem:* There is very little attention in B2B marketing literature towards currently observed geopolitical transformations and its influence on power in B2B systems. *Solution:* Future studies may explicitly focus on the interlinks between these two spheres, including gradual and discontinuous changes, especially for highly internationalized firms. **Firm power in context of network power** *Problem:* There is some research on multi-tier antecedents to firm power, however it usually neglect the possibility of groups of organizations acting together. *Solution:* More attention given not only to firm power but also to network power and their interlinks. **Suppliers and smaller firms** *Problem:* Current knowledge is largely in relation to MNEs which does not necessarily cover currently observable changes in power distribution. *Solution:* Incorporating perspective of smaller companies, especially suppliers, that make various attempts to improve their position in international value chains. **Ecosystems** Problem: While research indicates importance of some non-typical actors, the research on ecosystem antecedents is scarce. Solution: More research on ecosystem level is advised. **Cultural context** *Problem:* While the societal acceptance to coercion is very important in international business studies, the intercultural studies on antecedents to firm power are scarce. *Solution:* Considering power distance and other culture-specific aspects as the context for research.
Method	**Explorative design for novel antecedents** *Problem:* The research is too fragmented and complex to formulate hypotheses and test it through explanatory research designs. *Solution:* Applying rigorous explorative research design for specific research context and time frame. **Explicit versus of implicit levels** *Problem:* While the prior research de facto identifies power antecedents at various levels of B2B systems, these levels are usually not defined by authors. *Solution:* Explicit addressing the levels regarding theory, measurement, and analysis. **Narrative research and discourse analysis** *Problem:* Existing research does not pay much attention to subjective nature of power which limits our understanding of power dynamics. *Solution:* Applying perception suitable research techniques such as narrative research and discourse analysis. **Secondary data and longitudinal design** *Problem*: Longitudinal data gathering on multi-level power dynamics is expensive and therefore rarely applied. *Solution:* Making smart use of existing secondary data (news articles, government reports, company statements, published court judgments).

by the perspective of "*Western rich*" companies located in highly developed countries. This entails that we mostly have a picture of MNEs orchestrating international supply chains consisting of firms located in developing "South" or "East". We argue that research should be more balanced in this regard, which may be achieved not only by just doing more research on how firms from transforming economies build their power but also through looking more deeply into historical context of business relationships, including post-colonial and post-communist context. As an illustration, Ravishankar et al. (2013) used this perspective to examine the power dynamics between Western companies and Indian IT vendors in the context of IT offshoring. The authors argue that this dynamics is deeply embedded within the historical imbalances of inter-state power and the specific features of local business culture. Further studies may take into consideration other specific historical power structures for novel insights into why some companies are dominated by other companies.

The third decade of XXI century is clearly the era, where we observe intensify tensions between inter-state superpowers that haven't been seen for a long time and these tensions manifest into trade wars and proxy hot conflicts. This is interpreted as systemic change from formerly unipolar international order gravitating into multi-polar arrangement (Galbraith, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2019) with substantial implications into dynamics of global value chains (Hitt et al., 2021). We argue that further research should give more attention into how this context influence on the antecedents to the power of firms originating from various affected regions. Do these inter-state shifts translate proportionally into power switching on inter-firm level and what kind of strategies, if any, are developed by firms to make smart use of these changes? In combination with the gradual power shifts between firms as consequences of macro processes (Lechner et al., 2020; Tokatli, 2007), future studies may explore some discontinuous changes, e.g. politically-based decisions of MNEs to withdraw from concrete markets, and its consequences on the power in global supply chains.

While there is research on antecedents to firm power dispersed on multiple levels, including multi-tier impacts, the prior research usually neglect the possibility of groups of organizations acting together and therefore there is too much focus on firm power vis-à-vis network power. Further research may give more voice to the power of the larger relational structures, the perspective offered by the IMP approach in industrial marketing (Håkansson & Gadde, 2018). Research may explore how power of such "business actors" like alliances, business nets or franchising chains (Möller et al., 2005) develop and how does it influence on the power associated firms and external firms connected with such structures. As the example from our dataset, Ford and Gillan (2021) analyze how Global Union Federations leverage their power resources (structural, institutional, organizational, and symbolic) to influence the power position of multinational enterprises (MNEs).

Our review concludes that the research typically examines antecedents to firm power from the perspective of the buyer organization, especially MNEs. It entails that our understanding of the power driving-mechanism is largely skewed towards larger organizations. However, it looks like this perspective does not cover gradual but substantial changes in the position of some smaller suppliers which are fascinating for understanding power dynamics (Lechner et al., 2020; Tokatli, 2007). Therefore, it would be worthwhile to better understand what factors bring more power to smaller companies in international value chains, typically suppliers (Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016). There are already some

studies that explore these processes (e.g. Lacoste & Johnsen, 2015; Lechner et al., 2020; Siemieniako & Mitręga, 2018), but we certainly need more.

In our final dataset, there are very few studies analyzing non-business organizations in relationships with business organizations (e.g. Chamanara et al., 2023) and only one study taking NGO perspective as focal organization (Karki et al., 2021). However, there is no clear reason to neglect ecosystems as antecedents to firm power. On the one hand, there is visible power increase of some new actor types such as international NGOs, technological platforms, political interest groups, and providers of AI technology (Coveri et al., 2022; Diprose et al., 2022; Rashideh, 2020; Wegner et al., 2024). On the other hand, rise of economic nationalism (Helleiner, 2021) may translate into limited financing and marginalizing international NGOs. which may decrease their importance. Future research should give more attention to these changes and their impacts on the power of business actors.

In correspondence with the dilemma on whether the firm power may be abused (Grandinetti, 2017; Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016; Kim et al., 2022; Ratnasingam, 2000), we propose further research may take closer look at the cultural context of how firm power is built and used. Prior studies suggest that there is different perception of power in B2B relationships (G. Hawkins et al., 2014; Khakhar & Rammal, 2013; Skowronski et al., 2022), therefore further research on antecedents to firm power may apply intercultural design to identify some culture-specific power antecedents. One of the directions could be using the country classification related to power distance as the research context. As the starting point for how to make it one may consult Xu and Hao (2021) and the studies that showcase specific perception of power in B2B context by Arabian managers (Hawkins et al., 2014; Khakhar & Rammal, 2013).

8.3. Method

While our review provides that the field is dominated by qualitative research, especially case studies, we argue that there is still room for further explorative studies, instead of just switching to quantitative methods, especially regarding the research contexts that we previously presented as under-investigated. Additionally, finding interlinks between antecedents spread along analytical levels may be very difficult with quantitative studies as there are too many possible connections to be anticipated in such design. Here we align with Hopkinson and Blois (2014) who also advocate explorative research designs in spite of few decades research on the firm power (p. 144–145). Among possible research directions we imagine for example identification of some tactics and resources that are used by smaller suppliers from post-communist countries that might be specific to their historical context (i.e. being economically dominated as satellite country for half-century) and finding complicated set of antecedents that brought more power to them in longer time frame.

The level of antecedents applied in the investigated studies was generally interpreted by us with the use of 5-level framework (Table 1), because the authors themselves usually did not declare level of analysis in their studies. Regarding further studies, we suggest that authors will be more explicit regarding the levels they use in their research. Following Rousseau (1985) this can be done by addressing the levels of theory, measurement, and analysis. The level of theory pertains to the entity for which generalizations are made (e.g., individual, organization, supply chain). Each construct is associated with one or more organizational levels, with none being level-free (Klein et al., 1994). The level of measurement refers to the level of data collection, such as individual-level data through self-reports or group-level data through reports from multiple group members. The level of analysis determines the unit to which the data is assigned. Additionally, data aggregation requires careful justification, as the validity of aggregation is not inherently evident (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999).

The importance of subjectivity of power in B2B context is sometimes acknowledged in the literature, because in power asymmetrical relationships the power is not always perceived by the business partner (Blois, 2009). Very importantly, just looking through the definition of what firm power is on the hand, and also considering how power is measured in research practice, the power is not clearly objective phenomenon. However, vast majority of studies on firm power does not even discuss subjective nature of power "advantage". We argue that it is detrimental for the understanding of the antecedents to firm power, because partners perception regarding what level of power is legitimate, justified or beneficial have logical consequences on power dynamics, especially in terms of potential countervailing power (Lacoste & Johnsen, 2015). Additionally, the magnitude of power is clearly dependent on the perception of potential alternative partners. Importantly, such perceptual aspects are important not only on the level of single firms and their managers but also at the level of public discourse regarding what power-related practices are legitimate with the potential for creating "cultural hegemony" (Johnsen et al., 2020). Therefore, here we align with some authors (Blois, 2009; Blois & Hopkinson, 2013; Makkonen et al., 2021; Siemieniako, Mitręga, Makkonen, & Pfajfar, 2022a; Siemieniako, Mitręga, Makkonen, & Pfajfar, 2022b) that suggest wider application of narrative techniques for identification of power antecedents at various B2B levels. As an example of using narrations in the study of firm power one may consult Kaufmann et al. (2023) that utilize narratives to understand how firm power is developed in negotiations between buyer and sellers.

Traditionally, in social sciences research agendas include the call for more longitudinal designs to go beyond limitation of static cross-sectional data, however, in practice such directions are rarely implemented due to budgetary limitations of gathering primary data through various points of time. Obviously, these limitations become even stronger when applying multi-level understanding of the phenomenon due to multiplication of potential data points. Therefore, we suggest further research overcome these constraints by the use of already existing historical data instead of just acquiring new data. Sometimes to understand the power-related processes, it is justified to look quite far back in time. As the example from our dataset, studying historical data concerning almost 100 years of the marine sector development in Southern Italy, Schisani and Ragozini (2023) were able to demonstrate that the transition of the local business system from a focus on marine insurance companies to banks is linked to the strategic actions of local elites, who sought to maintain their power in the country. Another example of secondary data is the study by Olsen et al. (2014) who employed the data came from court documents related to a competition law case. The authors identified complex picture of power antecedents within the network in the Norwegian food industry by showing that the retailers' ability to mobilize financial resources and influence prices is secondary to their market knowledge regarding end consumers. As illustrated by Hardy et al. (2020) secondary data allows for problematizing taken-for-granted meanings and uncover the ways in which established meanings reproduce power relations among firms. The data for such analysis may come for example from news articles, academic papers discussing a particular topic or event, government reports, company statements and published court judgments.

9. Limitations

This study offers a structured, evidence-based review of the antecedents to firm power based on predefined assumptions; however, several limitations must be acknowledged at this stage. Our decision to concentrate on articles from high-ranking peer-reviewed journals, although supported by its benefits (Paul & Criado, 2020), may unintentionally omit significant contributions from other sources. To address this risk, we adjusted our assumptions by selectively incorporating publications from lower-tier journals focused on B2B marketing. The final sample size of studies aligns with the standards observed in recent systematic literature reviews within the B2B marketing domain

(Biemans et al., 2022; Cartwright et al., 2021; Gernsheimer et al., 2021). Secondly, the five-level analytical lens necessarily reduces the complexity of overlapping phenomena present in B2B relationships. Antecedents identified at the organizational level can also be observed at the personal level, as seen in the attitudes or behaviours of boundary spanners (e.g., Siemieniako et al., 2023) or in the development of personal social capital (Hawkins et al., 2014; Vafeas et al., 2016). This SLR is constrained by its inability to differentiate micro-personal factors as an additional layer of analysis. These factors are recognized as subcategories within the broader category of organizational antecedents (refer to table 7 in the appendix). Third, despite following strict coding and synthesis protocols with inter-rater checks, some subjectivity persists in our interpretation and categorization of each study's findings. The presentation of our categorizations, which includes definitions, exemplary quotations, and references, enables other researchers to conduct their own recoding, thereby ensuring replicability. Fourth, by restricting our analysis to empirical contributions, we reduced the focus on purely conceptual papers that might extend the discussion on the antecedents of firm power. Nonetheless, this bias was mitigated, as few non-empirical papers met our criteria, and their insights were presented in distinct sections of the manuscript. They do not challenge our findings. Fifth, the data collection for our SLR was conducted at the beginning of 2024, resulting in the exclusion of studies published thereafter. This is partially justified given the extended research-publishing cycle. Readers may refer to recent publications to identify which suggested research directions are currently most pursued. Sixth, although this SLR advances the understanding of the antecedents of firm power, it does not explicitly address the interconnections among these antecedents. The proposed map of multi-level antecedents does not fully encapsulate the dynamics of firm power, specifically the complex interplay of various antecedents, including both progressive and reversive trajectories. When looking at the events in time, it might be that some factors that were presented in our review as just "antecedents" may be become "consequences" and vice versa. For example, the contracts may become power consequence not its antecedent, if stronger partner enforces contracts vs. relational norms as governance mechanism (Bonatto et al., 2022). This research agenda presents specific recommendations for addressing this limitation in future studies. Taken together, the limitations highlight the inherent trade-offs in systematic literature reviews.

10. Conclusions

This paper presents antecedents to firm power classified across many levels of B2B systems, utilizing an analytical framework that clarifies the essential principles of each level, thereby augmenting understanding of company power in B2B contexts. Utilizing our work, researchers may adopt a more comprehensive perspective for designing their own research into the antecedents of firm power and make more deliberate choices on the aspects they intend to emphasize, after overview of the industrial context. This study goes beyond mere description of prior research, highlighting an insufficient emphasis on multi-tier, macro-environmental, and particularly, ecosystem aspects. Substantial empirical evidence demonstrates the significance of power antecedents distributed across these levels, while everyday observations of the brutalization of international politics indicate that the influence of individual business actors is increasingly constrained by larger, uncontrollable forces. The comprehensive, action-oriented future research agenda proposed in this study aims to assist researchers in effectively planning future studies by employing advanced multi-level theorization, enhanced contextual insights, and specific methodological tools. Lastly, the proposed research directions, when effectively implemented, should promote inclusivity in international value chains by amplifying the voices of actors whose perspectives have been mostly neglected thus far.

This study offers pragmatic insights for managers and policymakers aiming to improve their strategic tools for managing firm power in B2B settings. By acknowledging that firm power stems not only from direct inter-firm interactions but also from overarching systemic factors—including macro-level influences and ecosystem dynamics—managers can more adeptly foresee challenges and capitalize on opportunities. Managers should take a comprehensive perspective on power antecedents, integrating internally controllable resources and capabilities with tactics designed to address external unpredictability. Specifically, practitioners should closely monitor trends in both their immediate and broader environments, since the inability to control these trends may hinder their capacity to foresee them more swiftly than competitors, thereby enhancing their power in B2B negotiations. Policymakers may also utilize our study to recognize the significant role of themselves and other non-business actors in the distribution of power among enterprises. Considering this, policymakers may formulate policies and initiatives that promote more equitable power distributions in markets, so promoting healthier competitiveness and resilience within business ecosystems.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Maciej Mitręga: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Douglas Wegner:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Kadigia Faccin:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Hannu Makkonen:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Dariusz Siemieniako:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2025.06.003.

Data availability

The authors are unable or have chosen not to specify which data has been used.

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