What Makes Local Retailers Commit to Multinational Brands: Evidence from Multinational Brand-Retailer Dyads in Emerging Markets

ABSTRACT

This study advances our understanding of how multinational enterprises (MNEs) can foster local retailer commitment in emerging markets. Using a dyadic dataset of 153 brand-retailer pairs in China's B2B consumer electronics sector, we tested a conceptual framework examining how relationship strength, mutual knowledge acquisition, and knowledge asymmetries affect retailers' commitment to MNE brands. The findings confirm that strong brand-retailer relationships, brand knowledge acquired by retailers, and retailer knowledge acquired by brands all significantly enhance retailer commitment. Furthermore, the results support the moderating role of mutual knowledge exchange and confirm that knowledge asymmetries significantly shape commitment levels: a brand's knowledge advantage increases retailer commitment, while a retailer's knowledge advantage reduces it. This study thus enriches the B2B and international marketing literatures by showing that managing retailer commitment in emerging markets is not just about building strong relationships, but about strategically leveraging and aligning knowledge resources, both symmetrically and asymmetrically, within interdependent channel structures.

Keywords: Retailer commitment, multinational enterprises (MNEs), brand-retailer relationships, brand knowledge, knowledge acquisition, emerging markets

1. Introduction

Successfully managing the commitment of local retailers is crucial for multinational enterprises (MNEs) seeking to penetrate emerging markets (Gupta et al. 2010; Schaumann & Tarnovskaya 2023). Two real-world business cases demonstrate the importance of local retailer commitment.

Case 1: Procter & Gamble's (P&G) early dominance in China was built through its expansive offline distribution network, supplying over 1.2 million independent stores. However, facing slower growth in the late 2010s, P&G revamped its strategy to strengthen ties with rural and inland retailers, emphasizing the importance of committed local partnerships to sustain market leadership (HBS Digital Initiative 2017).

Case 2: Apple's recent shift in India underscores the critical role of local retailers. Previously hesitant to collaborate with smaller shops, Apple has now onboarded thousands of authorized independent retailers, offering attractive margins, financing options, and sales incentives to penetrate tier-2 and tier-3 cities (Rathee 2024).

Local retailers, typically small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited resources, are highly selective about the brands they support. Retailers' commitment to an MNE brand depends on their cost-benefit evaluation of the tangible and intangible value the brand offers (Gupta et al., 2010). While MNE brand managers can deliver tangible benefits such as financial incentives and logistical support, managing intangible benefits such as brand reputation and knowledge, trustworthiness, and relationship quality is equally vital. When these intangible benefits consistently exceed expectations over time, retailers gradually strengthen their commitment to the MNE brand. To effectively penetrate emerging markets, MNE brands must develop a deep understanding of local business networks and retailer relationships (Gupta et al.,

2010). Managing the commitment of local retailers is thus a critical challenge for MNE brand managers (Arikan et al., 2022; Glynn et al., 2007; Gupta et al., 2010). Figure 1 visualizes this relationship, illustrating how MNE brands from developed markets rely on local retailers to access consumers in emerging markets, with direct access often blocked without retailer intermediation.

Insert Figure 1 here

Given this landscape, we turn to the business-to-business (B2B) marketing and international marketing literatures and identify three critical research gaps. ***First***, although existing B2B research highlights the significance of manufacturer-retailer relationships, empirical studies specifically examining retailer commitment to a supplier's brand remain limited. Prior studies often use indirect measures such as brand preference or satisfaction rather than explicitly measuring retailer commitment. For example, Gupta et al. (2016) demonstrate that supplier support enhances retailers' willingness to carry a brand, while Glynn (2010) shows that intangible brand strengths foster distributor trust. However, no study explicitly tests retailer commitment as a distinct outcome, limiting our understanding of how to secure long-term retailer support essential for shelf-space, advocacy, and resilience against competition. Addressing this empirical gap would significantly advance B2B marketing literature and provide actionable guidelines for cultivating retailer commitment in emerging markets.

Second, while scholars emphasize the critical role of knowledge exchange between manufacturers and retailers, prior research has not fully examined whether knowledge levels

moderate the impact of relationship-building efforts on retailer brand commitment. According to the knowledge-based view (KBV), both the retailer's brand knowledge and the brand's retailer knowledge strengthen partnerships (Srivastava and Thomas 2010; Gupta et al. 2010; Čater and Čater 2010). It remains unclear whether strong relationships become even more effective when knowledge is high or whether deep retailer insights can substitute for formal relational investments. Addressing this gap would enhance B2B brand management literature and guide MNE brands in aligning knowledge-sharing with relationship strategies for better channel performance.

Third, the asymmetric distribution of knowledge between brands and retailers represents another underexplored area. The KBV suggest that holding superior knowledge creates power and performance advantages. In manufacturer-retailer relationships, a brand's knowledge advantage (e.g., deeper market insights or product expertise) may enhance retailer commitment, whereas a retailer's knowledge advantage (e.g., stronger local customer insights) may weaken dependence on the brand. Although prior studies hint at these dynamics, direct empirical testing remains limited. Understanding how knowledge asymmetries influence trust, commitment, and brand performance would enrich B2B relationship theory and help brands manage channel strategies more effectively, particularly in emerging markets.

To address these research gaps, the objective of this study is to expand the understanding of retailer brand commitment by exploring key factors that drive the commitment of local retailers in emerging markets. Our central argument is that MNE brands, operating through brand managers in distant emerging markets, strategically leverage local retailers as crucial distribution resources to effectively penetrate these markets. Yet the success of an MNE brand ultimately depends on effectively managing both relational dynamics and knowledge advantages within its retailer network. Thus, this study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors drive a retailer's commitment to a MNE brand in an emerging market?

RQ2: To what extent does the strength of the brand-retailer relationship affect the retailer's commitment?

RQ3: How do the MNE brand's and the retailer's knowledge about each other enable the retailer's commitment to the brand?

To answer these questions, we developed an integrated conceptual framework and tested it through an empirical study. We collected dyadic survey data from 153 MNE brand-local retailer pairs in China's B2B consumer electronics sector. The choice of China as the research context is motivated by its complex distributor-retailer networks, which account for the majority of wholesale trade. This setting offers a rich environment to examine our model in an emerging market. This research makes three key contributions. First, it provides conceptual clarity by explicitly grounding the framework in R-A theory, while showing how RDT and interdependence theory explain relational dynamics and strategic dependence in marketing channels. Second, it moves beyond dyadic trust and cooperation to empirically test knowledge asymmetries as drivers of commitment. Third, by focusing on the context of emerging markets, where institutional voids and channel fragmentation are common, the study reveals how relationship quality and knowledge deployment substitute for weak formal infrastructures, making relational strategy and knowledge advantage critical levers for MNE success.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Retailers' commitment to brands

Retailer commitment in B2B relationships is defined as the enduring desire of a buyer (retailer) to maintain a valued partnership with a seller (brand) that promises long-term benefits

over alternative short-term options (Moorman et al. 1992). In the seminal commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (RM), commitment is fostered by trust and the perception of mutual benefit in the relationship (Morgan and Hunt 1994). For example, Zhang et al. (2016) find that business customers achieve the highest commitment levels when involved in mutually beneficial relationships with their suppliers. Numerous studies similarly demonstrate that relational support, investments, and strong interpersonal bonds (e.g., shared values and cooperative norms) strengthen retailers' preference for and commitment to a brand (Caceres and Paparoidamis 2007; Čater and Čater 2010; Gupta et al. 2016; Simpson et al. 2001).

Despite these relational benefits, a core challenge for a MNE brand manager is to motivate independent local retailers, who often have their own goals and constraints, to dedicate effort and resources to the brand (Hughes and Ahearne 2010). Based on the resource-based view (RBV), previous studies have explained that the resources offered by brands are key to retailers' engagement with the brand (Glynn et al. 2007; Glynn 2010; Bendixen et al. 2004). These studies have broadened the understanding of retailers' commitment by explaining the differences between tangible (e.g., financial resource, price, and delivery speed) and intangible (e.g., brand reputation, identification, and perceived product reliability) resources that can facilitate that commitment. Such resources improve the retailer's performance by increasing sales, optimizing inventory, and delivering a better consumer experience. Retailers, in turn, become more committed to brands that help them achieve these outcomes (Glynn et al. 2007).

Among the intangible resources that brands and retailers exchange, knowledge stands out as a strategic asset. The KBV, an extension of the resource-based view, posits that knowledge is a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource that can confer sustainable advantage (Grant 1996). In a B2B branding context, aligning the retailer's knowledge about the brand with

the retailer's expectations and operations is crucial for a stable relationship (Srivastava and Thomas 2010). A brand's ability to acquire knowledge about its retailers (e.g., understanding a retailer's local market conditions and capabilities) and to share relevant brand knowledge (e.g., product know-how, market insights) can create unique joint insights (Gupta et al. 2010; Srivastava and Thomas 2010). However, while extant research recognizes that knowledge exchange can elicit various positive responses from partners (e.g., learning, adaptation, cooperation), it remains unclear what specific types of knowledge and under what conditions such knowledge exchange leads to greater retailer commitment. In other words, we lack a clear understanding of how knowledge-based resources translate into a retailer's enduring commitment to the brand.

As Table 1 illustrates, empirical analyses identifying the drivers of improved retailer commitment to a brand are scant. Prior works have proposed conceptual frameworks grounded in RM, RBV, and KBVto explain brand management in B2B relationships. Yet, there is little research that applies these theories to understand the building of retailer commitment from the perspective of knowledge exchange between the partners. This dearth is likely due to the complexity of brand-retailer relationships and the difficulty of obtaining dyadic data in emerging markets. To address this gap, we adopt resource-advantage (R-A) theory as our primary lens (Hunt and Morgan 1995), complemented by insights from resource dependence theory (RDT) (Hillman et al. 2009) and Interdependence Theory (Kumar et al. 1995). Together, these perspectives allow us to consider both the value of knowledge as a competitive resource and the influence of dependence structures in the brand-retailer dyad on the development of retailer commitment.

Insert Figure 2 here

Insert Table 1 here

2.2. Resource dependence and interdependence Effects on knowledge and commitment

Knowledge acquisition refers to the process by which a firm obtains new, useful knowledge from external sources (such as a partner firm) through their relationship activities (Inkpen 2000; Zhou et al. 2014). In a brand-retailer context, knowledge acquisition can occur via formal collaborations (e.g., joint training programs, data sharing agreements) or informal interactions (e.g., day-to-day communications, personnel exchange) that enable each party to learn from the other's expertise (Agarwal et al. 2009; Friesl 2012). Joint business activities not only grant access to new information but also allow a firm to observe how its partner applies that knowledge in practice (Kavusan et al. 2016; Rindfleisch and Moorman 2001).

Effective learning from a partner, however, depends on the partner's willingness to share its know-how and insights (Inkpen 2000; Zhou et al. 2014). Firms possessing unique and valuable knowledge are often protective of it and may hesitate to openly share critical know-how, fearing loss of competitive advantage (Zhou et al. 2014; Ozdemir et al. 2017). This reluctance is well-documented among horizontally competing firms, which use knowledge-guarding mechanisms to prevent valuable knowledge from leaking to rivals (Dyer and Nobeoka 2000). Even in vertical relationships (such as manufacturer–retailer), concerns about inadvertent knowledge transfer to downstream or upstream partners can make firms cautious (Belderbos et al. 2004; Ozdemir et al. 2017). Nonetheless, when brands and retailers do share valuable knowledge, the outcomes are often mutually beneficial. Studies find that vertically linked partners frequently achieve positive performance gains by exchanging knowledge, such as eliminating redundant processes, reducing

costs, improving customer service, and enabling faster, more reliable deliveries (Hult et al. 2004; Myers and Cheung 2008). Thus, knowledge sharing in a retailing channel relationship involves a balance: firms must weigh the benefits of collaboration against the risks of over-sharing, and this balance is influenced by the structure of dependencies between the partners.

RDT offers a useful framework for understanding why firms engage in knowledge exchange with partners and how this affects commitment. RDT posits that organizations are externally constrained – they depend on other firms for critical resources – and thus must manage exchange relationships to secure those resources and reduce uncertainty (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). In our context, a MNE brand and its local retailer each control certain resources that the other needs to thrive. The brand relies on the retailer for market access and local intelligence, whereas the retailer depends on the brand for product supply, brand equity, and managerial know-how. According to RDT, a retailer will be motivated to acquire knowledge from the brand if that knowledge is essential for the retailer's success (e.g., learning about new products or effective selling techniques). Similarly, a brand will invest in transferring knowledge to a retailer (or absorbing knowledge from the retailer) if it strengthens the brand's position in the market (e.g., ensuring the retailer can effectively sell the brand's products). Each firm's commitment to the relationship, therefore, partly hinges on how much it needs the partner's resources. However, RDT also suggests that firms will be cautious not to become overly dependent. A partner with exclusive knowledge may share information selectively to avoid empowering the other side to an extent that diminishes its own leverage. This dynamic implies that knowledge acquisition in a dyad is not just a function of goodwill or technical possibility, but also of strategic dependence considerations. Firms engage in knowledge sharing when it alleviates their resource dependencies and refrain when it could exacerbate their vulnerability.

The interdependence structure of the channel relationship further moderates how knowledge exchange translates into commitment. Interdependence theory in marketing channels distinguishes between the total interdependence of the two parties and the asymmetry in their interdependence (Kumar et al. 1995). Total interdependence refers to the overall degree to which both the retailer and the brand are mutually dependent on the relationship, whereas interdependence asymmetry captures imbalance – for instance, the retailer depending more on the brand than vice versa, or vice versa (Kumar et al. 1995). High total (mutual) interdependence tends to foster trust, cooperation, and a long-term orientation, because both sides have much to lose if the partnership fails. Indeed, empirical research demonstrates that channel relationships characterized by greater mutual dependence exhibit stronger commitment and higher trust, and experience less conflict, than those with lower interdependence (Kumar et al. 1995). A meta-analysis by Scheer et al. (2014) affirms that the form, degree, and balance of dependence between partners critically shape relational outcomes. When dependence is more balanced, each party is encouraged to invest in the relationship (rather than exploit the other), leading to more open information sharing and greater relationship stability. In contrast, when dependence is highly asymmetric, the less dependent party may wield its power by withholding support or information, while the more dependent party may feel vulnerable or restrained. Such imbalances can complicate knowledge sharing: the powerful firm might limit knowledge transfer to maintain its advantage, and the weaker firm, even if eager to learn, may not receive all the knowledge it needs. Given these dynamics, the impact of inter-firm knowledge acquisition on retailer commitment is contingent on the relationship context. A strong, collaborative brand–retailer relationship with balanced high interdependence provides a fertile ground for knowledge exchange to translate into commitment. In a high-trust, mutually dependent partnership, both sides willingly share and jointly create knowledge, and the retailer is

likely to appreciate and commit to the relationship as it reaps the benefits of that shared knowledge. For example, if a retailer and brand openly exchange market data and best practices, the retailer can improve its performance (e.g., better sell-through and customer satisfaction) and will remain committed to the brand that contributed to these gains. By contrast, in a weak or one-sided relationship, knowledge flow and utilization may be stymied. If the retailer does not depend much on the brand, it may see little value in investing effort to absorb the brand's knowledge. Alternatively, if the brand holds back critical knowledge due to power asymmetry, the retailer cannot fully benefit, which dampens the potential of knowledge acquisition to foster commitment. It is also possible that an overly embedded relationship could lead to redundant knowledge, highly familiar partners might share mostly overlapping information, yielding diminishing returns (Wang 2016). In such cases, the retailer's commitment might plateau or even decline if new value creation stagnates. Considering the substantial costs associated with acquiring and integrating external knowledge, especially tacit knowledge (Grant and Baden-Fuller 2004), firms will undertake knowledge exchange only when the relational context promises sufficient payoff. Therefore, drawing on resource dependence and interdependence insights, we argue that aligning the relationship conditions with knowledge acquisition is crucial for converting knowledge-based advantages into higher retailer commitment. Our framework thus examines how the interplay between the brand-retailer relationship (in terms of strength and dependence structure) and their reciprocal knowledge acquisition drives the retailer's commitment to the MNE brand.

2.3. Resource Advantage of Knowledge and Retailer Commitment

Knowledge possessed by a firm constitutes a strategic resource that can generate and sustain competitive advantage. According to Zack (1999), proprietary knowledge, especially if it is unique

and hard to replicate, can be a key differentiator in firm performance. A crucial distinction is between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is unwritten, experience-based know-how (e.g., insights, skills, heuristics) that is difficult to codify or transfer, whereas explicit knowledge is codified information that can be readily transmitted (e.g., written procedures, databases). Tacit knowledge tends to be more valuable and inimitable because it often reflects deep experience and complex routines (Nonaka 1994; Brockman and Morgan 2003). In B2B relationships, firms gradually develop rich tacit knowledge about each other's operations, capabilities, and needs through prolonged interaction and collaboration. For instance, a retailer might learn the nuances of a brand's supply chain process or marketing strategy, while the brand gains intimate knowledge of the retailer's customer base and in-store operations (Cavusgil et al. 2003). Such partner-specific knowledge is not easily acquired by outsiders, and thus it can strengthen the pair's competitive position. A retailer who deeply understands a particular brand may be far more effective at selling that brand than an otherwise similar retailer without that knowledge. Likewise, a brand with intimate knowledge of a retailer's business can tailor its support to that retailer far better than competing brands could.

R-A theory provides a theoretical lens to examine how knowledge can be leveraged for competitive gain in inter-firm relationships. R-A theory posits that firms attain superior performance by accumulating and effectively deploying comparatively advantageous resources (Hunt and Morgan 1995). In this view, each firm holds a portfolio of resources (tangible and intangible assets, capabilities, knowledge, etc.), and those with rarer, more valuable, and inimitable resources enjoy an advantage over rivals in the marketplace. Knowledge, particularly when it is complex and tacit, can be one such critical resource. A firm's knowledge base yields a comparative advantage when the firm can uniquely combine its knowledge resources into higher-order

competences that competitors cannot easily match. For example, a company might integrate a tangible knowledge resource such as an advanced data analytics system with an intangible resource like marketing expertise to create a superior customer insight capability. This unique competency can enhance the firm's market competitiveness by enabling it to identify opportunities or solve problems in ways that others cannot. In the context of a brand–retailer relationship, if a brand has developed an exceptional ability to synthesize market data (e.g., through analytics tools) with managerial know-how, it can uncover "hidden needs" of its retailers and address them better than competing brands. By doing so, the brand not only gains an edge over other suppliers (horizontal advantage) but also creates additional value for the retailer, strengthening the partnership. Similarly, a retailer that has superior knowledge of its customer base and operational know-how (perhaps via advanced CRM systems and years of experience) becomes a more effective collaborator for any brand. This retailer can make more informed decisions about which brands to carry and how to promote them, which forces brands to compete for access to such a capable partner. In essence, R-A theory suggests that knowledge advantages can be pivotal in both outperforming competitors and enhancing the efficacy of collaboration between a brand and retailer.

While R-A theory has traditionally been applied to competitive advantages against market rivals, it is equally relevant to advantages within partnerships. A firm can hold a comparative knowledge advantage not only relative to competitors but also vis-à-vis its trading partner. In a retailing channel, this means one firm's knowledge resources significantly exceed the other's in areas important to their cooperation. Such an imbalance can have important implications for commitment in the dyad. If a manufacturer brand possesses much deeper market knowledge, category expertise, or technological know-how than its local retailer, the brand can offer guidance

and resources that the retailer cannot easily obtain elsewhere. The retailer will likely value this and become more committed to the brand, because the partnership is a source of superior know-how and support (a direct application of R-A theory to the dyad). This scenario aligns with the idea of dependence in RDT: the retailer becomes more dependent on the brand for that valuable knowledge. By contrast, if a local retailer has accumulated a superior base of knowledge about the products and consumers (perhaps it understands the local consumer trends far better than the brand does), the knowledge advantage tilts toward the retailer. The brand may then depend on the retailer for insights into the market, reversing the dependence structure. In this case, the retailer's commitment to the specific brand could diminish – the retailer knows it has the upper hand in expertise and might leverage that to work with alternative brands or negotiate better terms, rather than feeling obliged to stay loyal. In other words, a retailer with a knowledge advantage has less need to be committed to any one brand, since it holds the critical resource (market knowledge) that brands desire. According to the dependence asymmetry view in inter-organizational relations, the balance of knowledge-based resources translates into power and control within the dyad. The firm with greater unique knowledge enjoys a dependence advantage, meaning it is less dependent on its partner (and the partner is more dependent on it). Classic theory states that the partner who is less dependent wields greater power in the relationship (Emerson 1962). Empirical research in supply chains concurs that the less dependent party can influence the terms of the relationship to its favor (Gulati and Sytch 2007; Hansen et al. 2013), Applying this to knowledge, Dong et al. (2018) conceptualize a firm's comparative knowledge advantage in a dyad as the difference between how much one firm depends on the other's knowledge versus how much the other depends on its knowledge. A large positive difference indicates that one firm holds a strong knowledge advantage, and the other is correspondingly vulnerable. The implication for commitment is twofold. ***First***, the

more dependent party, the one lacking the knowledge advantage, will have a strong incentive to commit to the relationship, because it greatly benefits from the partner's superior knowledge and cannot easily find a substitute for that resource. ***Second***, the knowledge-advantaged party may effectively control the extent of the other's commitment, given its power position. However, that advantaged party's own commitment is not guaranteed; because it has alternatives or could self-supply the needed expertise, it might be less tightly bound to the relationship unless it sees clear value in it.

Leveraging the combined insights of R-A theory and RDT, we argue that knowledge asymmetries in the brand-retailer dyad influence retailer commitment. If the brand holds a higher comparative knowledge advantage (for example, the brand's knowledge about the local market or retailing is far greater than what the retailer knows about the brand), the retailer's dependence on the brand increases, leading to higher commitment to maintain access to that valuable resource. Conversely, if the retailer holds the knowledge advantage (knows more relevant market or product information than the brand does), the retailer's dependence on the brand decreases, likely reducing its commitment to that brand. Only when both partners perceive value in each other's knowledge, as in a balanced, high-interdependence scenario, will mutual commitment be robust. Through this theoretical lens, our study formally proposes that a multinational brand's knowledge advantage positively affects the local retailer's commitment to the brand, whereas a retailer's knowledge advantage can impede its commitment to the multinational brand. This framework is grounded in R-A theory's focus on competitive use of resources, enriched by RDT and interdependence theory that explain how power and mutual reliance play out in the brand-retailer relationship. Together, these perspectives provide a solid foundation for our hypotheses on what drives local retailers' commitment to MNE brands.

3. Hypothesis Development

3.1. Brand-Retailer Relationship and Retailer Commitment

RM theory posits that robust relational ties (characterized by trust, mutual norms, and satisfaction) foster greater commitment between business partners (Dong et al. 2018; Ghosh et al. 2004). This link between relationship quality and commitment is well-established in developed markets; for example, the commitment-trust paradigm highlights that trust acts as a key antecedent of commitment in stable B2B exchanges (Glynn et al. 2007; Glynn 2012; Gupta et al. 2010; Gupta et al. 2016). However, while intuitively appealing, this mechanism has largely been examined in developed economies and its applicability to multinational brand-local retailer relationships in emerging markets remains underexplored. Emerging markets are characterized by unique socio-economic and institutional conditions, including institutional voids, fragmented markets, and weaker formal infrastructures, that can alter how relationships drive partner commitment (Gupta et al. 2015; Koch 2022; Mair et al. 2012). Indeed, prior work calls for research on how institutional and cultural environments in emerging markets shape local relationship management, noting that current knowledge falls short and more investigation is needed (Kumar, 2014; Murphy and Li, 2015). We address this gap by examining whether strong brand-retailer ties similarly engender commitment in the under-researched context of an emerging market distribution channel.

Emerging market contexts present distinct challenges for managing brand–retailer relationships. Unlike the consolidated retail chains typical of developed markets, many emerging economies have highly fragmented retail sectors. For instance, in China the offline retail landscape is “inefficient and fragmented” with roughly 6.8 million independent mom-and-pop stores, forcing MNEs like P&G to build extensive distribution networks reaching over 1.2 million small outlets

(The HBS Digital Initiative 2017). Likewise, global brands entering markets such as India often rely on myriad small retailers. Apple's recent experience in India is illustrative: the company, which initially avoided small independent outlets, dramatically shifted strategy to "onboard" thousands of local resellers and provide them financing and incentives in order to expand its reach (Rathee 2024). These examples underscore that in emerging markets, building and nurturing strong relationships with local retailers is not just optional – it is essential for market access and coverage. MNEs face pronounced resource asymmetries vis-à-vis local small and medium-sized retailers (e.g., differences in capital, knowledge, and bargaining power), as well as unreliable infrastructure and weak formal institutions. Strengthening relational bonds (through trust, support, and incentives) is a key way to bridge these gaps and secure retailers' commitment to the brand's success.

In such environments, a strong brand–retailer relationship functions as a compensatory mechanism to overcome institutional voids and other market deficiencies. When legal enforcement, formal contracts, or efficient logistics systems are lacking, firms must lean on relational governance – trust, personal ties, and mutual dependence – to ensure cooperation and channel stability (Graça et al. 2016). This logic aligns with the RBV of the firm: an MNE's network of committed local partners constitutes a valuable, inimitable resource that can confer competitive advantage, especially in challenging environments. By investing in relationship-building, an MNE can tap into local retailers' market knowledge and loyalty, while retailers gain access to the brand's resources and support, a mutually beneficial exchange that substitutes for missing institutional support structures. In other words, strong relationships become a strategic resource in emerging markets, helping both parties navigate institutional voids, resource asymmetries, and infrastructure weaknesses. Therefore, even though the positive effect of relationship quality on commitment may appear "intuitive," it takes on renewed importance and novel context in emerging markets. We

expect that, in these markets, the better the quality of the brand–retailer relationship, the higher the retailer's commitment to the MNE brands. We hypothesize that:

H1: In emerging markets, stronger brand-retailer relationship quality is positively associated with the local retailer's commitment to the MNE brand.

3.2. Brand knowledge acquired by local retailers

Prior research suggests that a retailer's knowledge about a brand can encourage greater commitment to that brand (e.g., through trust and reduced uncertainty) (Douglas et al. 2001; Gupta et al. 2010; Srivastava et al. 2001). However, existing studies have not fully examined how this knowledge translates into commitment, especially in the context of emerging markets. In emerging economies—often characterized by chronic resource shortages and inadequate infrastructure — retailers rely heavily on their upstream brand partners for support and information (Sheth, 2011). We posit that brand knowledge acquired by the retailer plays a strategic role in such contexts by enabling the retailer to evaluate the brand's fit with its business needs and local market conditions.

Brand knowledge is particularly vital for B2B relationship (Hewett and Bearden 2001; Lawson et al. 2009). Keller (2003) defines brand knowledge as "*the personal meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory, that is, all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information*" (p. 596). In practical terms, this includes the retailer's awareness of the benefits of partnering with the brand, recognition of the customer segments likely to demand the brand's products, recall of product knowledge and training provided by the brand, and understanding of the brand's saleability in the local market (Gupta et al. 2010). Armed with these facets of knowledge, a retailer can more effectively gauge whether carrying the multinational brand will enhance its performance. For example, a retailer with in-depth brand knowledge can form well-

informed expectations about the brand's saleability, customer demand, and profitability in their store. This capability helps the retailer determine that the brand's offerings align with its operational capacities and strategic goals. As a result, the retailer gains confidence that investing in the brand will yield long-term benefits, which in turn strengthens its commitment to the brand. We argue that in emerging markets, the more extensive the brand knowledge a retailer has, the more readily it can discern the strategic and operational fit of the brand to its business. This alignment of expectations and perceived fit, fostered by knowledge, should lead to higher commitment. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2: The greater the brand knowledge acquired by the local retailers, the higher the local retailer's commitment to that brand.

3.3. Retailer knowledge acquired by MNE brands

In emerging markets, successful channel relationships depend on a multinational brand's ability to understand and support its local retailers amid high uncertainty (Hughes and Ahearne 2010). We argue that when a brand acquires in-depth knowledge about its retailer partners' goals, capabilities, and pain points, it bolsters the retailer's commitment to the brand (Day 1994; Gilliland 2003). Interdependence theory suggests that a high degree of mutual reliance aligns the interests of partners and minimizes conflict, thereby fostering greater trust and commitment (Kumar et al. 1995). A brand that deeply understands each retailer's strengths, motivations, and concerns is demonstrating such mutual alignment of interests. By recognizing what the retailer wants to achieve and what challenges it faces, the brand signals that it is invested in the retailer's success. For example, retailers, acting as intermediaries, can provide critical market information that helps

mitigate issues such as quantity distortions (Chen et al. 2014). This convergence of interests reassures the retailer that the brand will act fairly and respond to its specific needs, which builds trust in the relationship.

RDT further illuminates this mechanism: knowledge is a critical resource for reducing uncertainty in volatile environments (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Local retailers often depend on their supplier brands for expertise, market information, and technical know-how. When an MNE brand demonstrates rich knowledge of a retailer's context, it can provide more customized support – for example, tailored training programs, marketing strategies suited to the retailer's clientele, or quick responses to retailer feedback and complaints. Such responsiveness and tailored assistance lower the retailer's perceived risks. The retailer feels less uncertainty about carrying the brand because the brand's actions show understanding and fairness (e.g. addressing the retailer's complaints equitably and adjusting policies to fit local conditions). Some observations support this logic. For instance, Apple's failure to grasp the needs and feedback of its independent resellers in China led those retailers to disengage and promote local competitors (Rathee 2024). In contrast, Huawei's channel program offers its partners localized market insights and training, reflecting Huawei's deep knowledge of their situation – as a result, retailers fully commit to Huawei to access this valuable support. These examples illustrate that a responsive brand partner increases a retailer's commitment to invest in the relationship.

In sum, a MNE brand's acquisition of retailer-specific knowledge creates a virtuous cycle: by understanding the retailer's business well, the brand can enact supportive behaviors that reinforce the retailer's commitment. According to interdependence theory, this reduces relational problems and aligns incentives, strengthening commitment. Likewise, from a RDT perspective, the brand's knowledge mitigates the retailer's environmental uncertainties and dependence concerns,

encouraging the retailer to commit more resources to the partnership. Therefore, we propose the following:

H3: The greater the local retailer knowledge acquired by the MNE brand, the higher the local retailer's commitment to that brand.

3.4. Moderating Effect of Retailer's Brand Knowledge

A strong brand-retailer relationship is critical for developing mutual familiarity, enhancing trust, and reducing opportunistic behaviors in interorganizational relationships. Extant research highlights organizational knowledge as a foundational resource that facilitates long-term relational stability and competitive advantage (Argote & Ingram, 2000). Specifically, retailers' brand knowledge is defined as the depth of their understanding regarding brand products, performance, and associated market opportunities. Brand knowledge can significantly influence retailer commitment. Retailers equipped with thorough brand-specific knowledge can develop accurate, realistic expectations of the brand's performance, including anticipated sales volumes, customer demand, and profitability.

Services marketing literature suggests that when a service performance falls below expectations, this may lead to negative customer emotions such as anger, irritation, frustration, and annoyance (Sivakumar et al. 2014). In this context, customers often terminate their relationships and become less committed to the brands when their experiences of brands fall well below their expectations (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002). Extending this logic to retailer-brand relationships, retailers with greater brand knowledge are better positioned to form precise expectations and thus experience fewer discrepancies between expected and actual outcomes. Consequently, when brand-retailer ties are strong and supported by retailer brand knowledge, retailers are more likely

to sustain and enhance their commitment due to the congruence of expectations and outcomes. Therefore, we propose:

H4: *Retailers' acquired brand knowledge positively moderates the relationship between brand-retailer relationship quality and retailer commitment to the MNE brands. Specifically, the relationship is stronger when retailers possess a high level of brand knowledge.*

Building on RDT and interdependence theory (Scheer et al., 2014), this study argues that mutual knowledge between brands and retailers significantly influences retailer commitment. According to RDT, organizations strategically manage dependencies on external resources such as knowledge to mitigate uncertainty and secure critical resources necessary for operational effectiveness (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Within a brand-retailer dyad, mutual dependence on each other's specialized knowledge resources, described as "knowledge dependence," enhances the quality and stability of interorganizational relationships (Howard et al. 2017). Such mutual knowledge exchange not only reduces the transaction costs associated with obtaining critical market and operational knowledge but also fosters trust and long-term relational stability.

Interdependence theory further reinforces the importance of balanced mutual dependence between channel partners. Relationships characterized by symmetrical dependence encourage cooperative behaviors, extensive knowledge-sharing, and strong commitment, as both brands and retailers recognize mutual benefits from sustained cooperation (Scheer et al. 2014). Thus, when both retailers possess extensive brand knowledge and brands possess extensive retailer knowledge, the resulting balanced dependence fosters deeper relational ties, ultimately enhancing retailer commitment. Therefore, we hypothesize a three-way interaction effect:

H5: *There is a three-way interaction among brand-retailer relationship quality, retailers' acquired brand knowledge, and brands' acquired retailer knowledge on retailer commitment. Specifically, the positive relationship between the brand-retailer relationship and retailer commitment is strongest when both retailers' acquired brand knowledge and brands' acquired retailer knowledge are high.*

3.5. Knowledge Advantage Effects on Retailer Commitment

Previous research identifies knowledge as a critical strategic resource capable of generating sustainable competitive advantages, particularly when knowledge is embedded in complex organizational routines and difficult for competitors or partners to imitate (Zack 1999). According to R-A theory, firms possessing superior knowledge resources can deliver exceptional value and maintain a strong competitive position by creating distinctive relational and market advantages. In brand-retailer relationships, knowledge asymmetries between partners shape the structure of dependence and consequently influence retailer commitment. Specifically, if brands possess superior market intelligence, product expertise, or managerial know-how relative to their retailers, they hold a clear knowledge advantage. Under such circumstances, retailers recognize their heightened dependence on the brand's valuable resources, increasing their motivation to maintain and strengthen commitment to the brand. For instance, brands such as Huawei provide detailed market analytics and educational training to retailers, enhancing retailers' capabilities and incentivizing sustained relational commitment. Thus, consistent with R-A theory and RDT, we propose:

H6: Brands' knowledge advantage over retailers is positively related to retailers' commitment to the MNE brand. Specifically, when brands possess superior knowledge resources relative to retailers, retailers' dependence on these resources increases, enhancing their commitment to the brand.

Conversely, retailer knowledge advantage also significantly influences relational dynamics. When retailers possess superior knowledge of local markets, customer preferences, and consumer behaviors relative to the brands, their dependence on brands diminishes, weakening their motivation to sustain commitment. Interdependence theory suggests that dependence asymmetry often introduces instability, dissatisfaction, and diminished relational trust, resulting in weakened long-term commitment (Anderson and Weitz 1989; Dwyer et al. 1987; Palmatier et al. 2007). Retailers leveraging superior market insights hold substantial relational power and may reduce commitment to a particular brand, opting instead to diversify their brand partnerships or negotiate more favorable terms.

This dynamic is illustrated clearly by Apple's experience in China, where the company heavily relied on third-party retailers and lacked direct market control. Local retailers with deeper consumer knowledge and direct market access gradually shifted their emphasis to promoting local smartphone brands (e.g., Huawei, Xiaomi, OPPO), undermining Apple's competitive advantage. Retailers' superior local knowledge significantly weakened their commitment to Apple, reflecting a critical asymmetry of dependence. Hence, we propose:

H7: Retailers' knowledge advantage over brands is negatively related to retailers' commitment to the MNE brand. Specifically, when retailers possess superior knowledge about local markets and

consumer insights relative to brands, their dependence on the brand decreases, resulting in lower retailer commitment.

We summarize our conceptual framework in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 here

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4. Research Method

4.1. Data collection and sample

Our study was conducted in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province. Guangzhou city was chosen because it attracts major multinational consumer electronics brands (e.g., Intel, Samsung, HP, and Sony) and domestic brands (e.g., Huawei, Xiaomi, Vivo, and Meizu), hence the area is characterized by a highly competitive consumer electronics market. Multinational brands in particular tend to adopt a concessionary business model, which allows them to penetrate the market through authorized retailers and thus compete with China's domestic brands. Such a research context is an essential requirement, given the research question our study aims to answer.

As the target retailer and brand managers are located in China, all survey questions were translated into Chinese by one of the authors. To ensure quality, the translated version of the questionnaire was then double-checked by two researchers who are familiar with both languages. Following the survey translation procedure recommended by Brislin (1980), the final draft was translated back into English for comparison with the original. This process of back translation

ensures the face validity and accuracy of the items. To ensure consistency in the terminology, a few changes were made to the retailer's brand knowledge scale.

To initiate our investigation, we recruited 36 research assistants (RAs) from top universities in Guangdong province, to assist with data collection and follow-up. We divided them into 6 groups, each comprising 6 RAs under the leadership of their supervisors. This is an effective approach to collect primary data as it is usually very difficult to obtain valid responses via postal or online surveys in China. Before conducting the survey, we held two training workshops to ensure that the RAs were thoroughly prepared and could meet all consistency and other requirements. First, to ensure the RAs' understanding of the survey questions and the objective of our study, we developed an explicit written and verbal instruction that contained the definitions of key concepts. Second, we specified the procedure to conduct the survey, and provided a guideline for using the survey platform. We set up a WeChat group through which we would be able to promptly resolve any problems that might be encountered during the survey process.

RAs conducted the survey in pairs (18 pairs in total), each of which was assigned 50 retailers to contact; in total, 900 retailers across six districts in Guangzhou were invited by the RAs to participate in our research. To collect dyadic data, one RA from each pair gathered responses to the first part of the questionnaire, including brand-retailer relationship and retailer's brand knowledge of retailer from the retailers. Of the 900 retailers contacted by the RAs, only 421 agreed to participate in the project and complete the survey. Finally, 313 retailers completed the first part of the questionnaire, which resulted in a response rate of 34.78% (i.e., 313/900). To avoid potential bias in data collection, we collected data on the construct of brand manager's retailer knowledge from the responses given by brand managers. After the first part of the questionnaire was completed, the other RA in each pair asked the retailers to nominate a major multinational brand

owning company who would serve as key respondent on the supplier side of the dyad. Each potential brand firm respondent was informed of the identity of the retailer firm that had referred them to us and was requested to provide data on the brand manager's retailer knowledge. Of the 313 potential respondents from the brand owning companies who were contacted by telephone, 210 provided completed survey responses. Thus, our dataset comprised 210 brand-retailer dyads, with an average relationship length of these dyads between three years and five years. It is important to note that to ensure the validity of the brand-retailer relationship, we included a filter question in the questionnaire that checked whether the respondents had experienced at least a one-year collaboration relationship with their brand.

To reduce the potential biases in data collection, we collected data on the construct of dependent variable at two points in time. The literature provides little theoretical rationale for the use of an appropriate time interval that allows retailers' commitment to occur over a period of time. Thus, we selected a 1-year temporal interval for this study, a choice guided by our retailer interviews. Specifically, the majority of retailers experienced little change in their commitment to the brand in a short period of time. This choice is consistent with common research practice in marketing (Mena and Chabowski 2015). Thus, we collected data at two points in time. Specifically, we gathered responses on brand-retailer relationship, brand knowledge of retailer, and retailer knowledge of brand managers at t0 and data on retailer commitment at t1, 1 year later. The same RA team in Study 2 visited the retailers who participated in the survey again and provided a prize as incentives to complete a short follow-up questionnaire. Of the 210 participants at t0, 153 completed this questionnaire at t1. Two questionnaires were dropped because they failed the informant quality test. Thus, the response rate for the t1 sample was 72.86% (i.e., 153/210). The

final sample for testing the hypotheses comprised 153 responses containing data collected at two points in time, representing an overall effective response rate of 17.00% (i.e., 153/900).

While ideally, we would wish to keep the drop rate of the dyads as low as possible, because of the highly dynamic environment in Chinese electronic industry, it is extremely difficult to collect the information from same respondents after one year. According to our follow up survey, some of the dropped respondents were no longer doing business in the electronics industry. Moreover, although our drop rate of 27% seemed to be high, it is still comparable with the empirical study of dyad business relationship. For example, in a recent study of Gligor (2018), which explored flexibility fit between suppliers and customers, the drop rate of the supplier-customer dyads is about 26% and this study even did not use the time interval between the independent variable and dependent variable.

4.2. Tests for non-response bias.

The non-response bias for the retailer firms was assessed by comparing the early respondents (n=151) and late respondents (n=159), with regard to firm size (number of employees), firm sales and firm age. To do so, we conducted a chi-square test, and found no significant results for the difference between the early respondents and late respondents at the level of 0.05. We also compared the non-participating and participating companies based on the number of employees and industry type. Again, no significant differences ($p>0.05$) were found.

Moreover, to ensure that the selected brand managers and retailer dyads were relevant, to examine the theoretical model and to further examine the non-response bias, we collected supplementary data on the brands' other retailer firms. Following Gligor (2018), we contacted 60 of the respondents from brand owning firms and asked them to nominate another set of key/major

retailers, different from those already included in the research. Of those 60 respondents, 32 provided us with the contact details of their alternative retailers. Then, we sent the questionnaire via mail and email to those retailers to evaluate their knowledge toward the brand. Given the low response rate in the initial round of data collection (18.75% [6/32]), we asked 10 RAs to reach out directly to those remaining retailer firms. Finally, a full sample of 32 retailer firms was received. We then compared the first-round retailers' knowledge toward the brand (*retailer 1*) with the responses of the second-round retailers' knowledge toward the brand (*retailer 2*). We found no significant differences between the levels of brand knowledge across the two dyads.

4.3. Tests for common-method bias.

Questionnaires-based research suffers from certain limitations. In particular, the common method bias could be a critical concern when using this methodology. In this study, both a priori methods and post hoc statistical techniques were adopted (Hulland et al. 2018). With regard to a priori methods, we adopted the recommendations of Hulland et al. (2018) to (1) adopt multiple respondents for each research unit and (2) separate the dependent and independent constructs physically within the questionnaire. *First*, the cross-sectional questionnaire setting (i.e., a single respondent at a specific point in time) is traditionally regarded as the major source of common method bias. To eliminate the issues raised by the single-respondent data, this study collected responses for each research unit from multiple respondents (i.e., brand representatives and retailers) (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Moreover, we collected the data for the independent and dependent variables at different times. *Second,* as it is impossible to use secondary data to measure our

dependent variable (i.e., retailer's brand commitment), we physically separated the questionnaire by using two different formats[1] with different response scales.

In addition to adopting a set of a priori methods to control the common method bias, we also checked for this type of bias by using two post hoc analysis tests. Specifically, we (1) used a single unmeasured method factor to account for method variance at the item level, and (2) measured the source of social desirability directly. First, following Paulraj et al. (2008) and Widaman (1985), two CFA models were tested, of which one involved only the traits and one included a method factor in addition to the traits. Comparison of these models revealed that the factor loadings were roughly the same and the t-values of the items remained significant despite the inclusion of the method factor. Moreover, the method factor accounted for 13.21% of the common variance and marginally improved the model fit (CFI by 0.02, NNFI by 0.03 and RMSEA by -0.004). Therefore, we can conclude that the threat of common method bias in this study is small. Second, the literature argues that self-reported measures might be biased by social desirability. We assessed the social desirability using a short version of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, developed and verified by Strahan and Gerbasi (1972). Given the insignificant correlation results between the social desirability measures and four observed constructs, we can conclude that this study does not suffer significantly from social desirability bias.

4.4. Measure validation procedure

In order to obtain an overall picture of the factor structure of the retained items, before assessing the measurement model we conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA). This was done

[1] For the independent variables, measured by the Likert Scale, the respondents delivered their answers to the RAs' digital devices. For the independent variables, the respondents provided answers regarding their commitment level through the paper copy of the questionnaire.

in two steps. First, the factors with their proposed corresponding items were separately analyzed by Principal Component Analysis (PCA), which has been utilized consistently in previous research (Zhao et al. 2008). All the proposed items satisfied the criterion of factor loading above 0.40 (Netemeyer et al. 2003). In order to confirm the uni-dimensionality, the second step of the EFA was to aggregate all the indicators and rerun the PCA with the VARIMAX rotation method. The result of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was 0.904, greater than the recommended value of 0.60 (Worthington and Whittaker 2006), which indicated that the sample of this study was adequate for running the EFA. After REK5, REK6 and BR5 were dropped due to significant cross-loading problems, the EFA was re-run and the uni-dimensionality was confirmed in the 21-item structure. Next, we assessed the internal consistency of the scales by analyzing the item-to-total correlations for each construct. The results revealed that all item-to-total correlation values were above 0.50 ($p<0.01$). Therefore, no item was dropped in the test of internal consistency. Moreover, Cronbach's alpha was computed to test whether the scales developed were reliable (Nunnally 1978; Hair 2006). Because the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability of all the latent variables were greater than the cut-off value of 0.70, the construct reliability was confirmed. To verify the 21 items remaining after EFA, we applied confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS v25. We employed a covariance matrix model of these items with maximum likelihood estimation. As shown in Table 2, the standardized factor loadings were all above the cut-off value of 0.50, and their corresponding t-values were all greater than 7.00, significant at the 0.001 level. Therefore, the convergent validity was confirmed.

Insert Table 2 here

The fit indices indicated that the model provides a good fit for the data ($X^2(330) = 225.213$, $p<0.001$; $\chi 2/df = 1.773$; NNFI = 0.951; CFI = 0.959; SRMR= 0.077; RMSEA= 0.071). We found that all composite reliabilities and AVEs of the latent constructs were greater than the recommended values of 0.70 and 0.50 respectively. Therefore, the composite reliability and AVE results confirmed the convergent validity. We assessed the discriminant validity by comparing the square root of the AVE with the inter-correlation (Fornell and Larcker 1981). As shown in Table 3, the square roots of the AVE value (diagonal figures with bold face) were all greater than other inter-correlation values. This result provides good evidence that the discriminant validity criterion was met.

Insert Table 3 here

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5. Research Results

This study examines the theoretical model (Figure 3) through covariance-based structural equations modeling (CB-SEM) and hierarchical regression method. CB-SEM was chosen for this study because of its strengths in testing theory-driven models and evaluating overall model fit. Unlike exploratory or variance-based techniques, CB-SEM allows us to compare the observed covariance matrix with that implied by our hypothesized model, providing rigorous goodness-of-fit indices for the entire model (Lowry and Gaskin 2014). This capability is crucial for our theory-centric research question – it enables a direct assessment of how well our theoretical framework

fits the data. Moreover, CB-SEM follows a confirmatory approach where the model structure is specified a priori based on theory and then tested against the data (Haenlein and Kaplan 2004). This aligns perfectly with our objective of validating a proposed causal model derived from existing literature. By using CB-SEM, we could examine the overall model validity (e.g., via fit indices such as CFI and RMSEA) in addition to individual path coefficients, thereby ensuring that our conclusions about the theory's adequacy are grounded in a comprehensive model evaluation. We candidly acknowledge the sample size as a limitation and are grateful to the reviewer for highlighting it. A larger sample would undoubtedly increase statistical power and further solidify the findings. Nevertheless, we argue that the current sample size does not invalidate our results or their theoretical implications. All key parameters in the model are significant and in the expected directions, and the model's fit indices indicate an acceptable fit to the data (for example, CFI value above 0.90 and RMSEA below 0.08 in our results). These outcomes imply that even with 153 observations, the model captures the underlying relationships effectively. We also took care to check the robustness of our solution: for instance, we found no evidence of problematic multicollinearity among predictors (variance inflation factors were well below common cut-off values) and all standardized factor loadings were high (and significant), supporting construct reliability and validity. Such diagnostics, along with theory-consistent results, give us confidence that the CB-SEM findings are sound.

Before examining the structural model, this study employed EFA and CFA again for ensuring reliability and validity for all t1 and t2 scale measurements. The fit indices indicated that the model fit data well. Individual reliability score for each item was also assessed using acceptable threshold (<0.50) for their conceptual fit and domain representativeness (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Suitability of the scale was encouraging. Moreover, factor loadings for all items were significant, with the

lowest standardized loading equal to 0.701 ($p < .01$). The average variance extracted (AVE) values for the dimensions exceed 0.50; composite reliability (CR) coefficients were the cut-off value of 0.70. Therefore, the results demonstrated good uni-dimensionality and convergent validity. Before producing the interaction terms, each scale in our models is first mean-cantered to deal with the potential multi-collinearity problem (Cohen et al. 2013).

We applied a hierarchical multiple regression model to test our theoretical model. For each regression model, the dependent variable was measured the year after (t_1) the independent variables (t_0). In our regression model, three control variables are first examined in the Model 1. Then Model 2a tested the three main effects of brand knowledge of retailer, brand-retailer relationship and retailer knowledge of brand managers on retailer commitment. To test Hypothesis 1-3, we used the following regression model:

$$Commitment_{i,t1} = a_1 FSize_{i,t0} + a_2 FAge_{i,t0} + a_3 FSales_{i,t0} + a_4 BranRetaRelationship_{i,t0} + a_5 BranKnowledge_{i,t0} + a_6 RetaKnowledge_{i,t0}$$

where

Commitment is a mean-centered latent variable of retailer's commitment in year t_1;

FSize is the logarithm of the number of employees of a retailer firm in year t_0;

FAge reflects the number of years a retailer firm has established in year t_0;

FSales is the logarithm of the sales revenue of a retailer firm in year t_0;

BranRetaRelationship is a measure of Brand-Retailer Relationship of a retailer firm in year t_0, which is a mean-centered latent variable;

BranKnowledge is a measure of Brand Knowledge of Retailer in year t_0, which is a mean-centered latent variable; and

RetaKnowledge is a measure of Retailer Knowledge of Brand in year t_0, which is a mean-centered latent variable.

The purpose of establishing Model 3 was to examine the two-way interaction between brand-retailer relationship and brand knowledge of retailer. To test Hypothesis 4, we created an interaction term for Brand Knowledge of Retailer and Brand-Retailer Relationship:

$$Commitment_{i,t1} = a_1 FSize_{i,t0} + a_2 FAge_{i,t0} + a_3 FSales_{i,t0} + a_4 BranRetaRelationship_{i,t0} + a_5 BranKnowledge_{i,t0} + a_6 RetaKnowledge_{i,t0} + a_7 (BranRetaRelationship_{i,t0} \times BranKnowledge_{i,t0})$$

Model 4 is established as a basis for the comparison among models to obtain the incremental explained variance and F hierarchical value. To test Hypothesis 5, we used the three-way interaction among brand knowledge of retailer, brand-retailer relationship and retailer knowledge of brand managers:

$$\begin{aligned} Commitment_{i,t1} &= a_1 FSize_{i,t0} + a_2 FAge_{i,t0} + a_3 FSales_{i,t0} + a_4 BranRetaRelationship_{i,t0} \\ &+ a_5 BranKnowledge_{i,t0} + a_6 RetaKnowledge_{i,t0} \\ &+ a_7 (BranRetaRelationship_{i,t0} \times BranKnowledge_{i,t0}) \\ &+ a_8 (RetaKnowledge_{i,t0} \times BranKnowledge_{i,t0}) \\ &+ a_9 (BranRetaRelationship_{i,t0} \times RetaKnowledge_{i,t0}) \\ &+ a_{10} (BranRetaRelationship_{i,t0} \times RetaKnowledge_{i,t0} \\ &\times BranKnowledge_{i,t0}) \end{aligned}$$

Model 6 tested the effects of knowledge advantages (H6-H7) on the brand commitment:

$$\begin{aligned} Commitment_{i,t1} &= a_1 FSize_{i,t0} + a_2 FAge_{i,t0} + a_3 FSales_{i,t0} + a_4 BrandKnowlegeAdvan \\ &+ a_5 RetailerKnowlegeAdvan \end{aligned}$$

where

BrandKnowledgeAdvan is the measure of Brand Knowledge Advantage over the Retailer:

$$BrandKnowledgeAdvan = \begin{cases} \text{BranKnowledge} - \text{ResKnowledge}, & if\ BranKnowledge > RetaKnowledge \\ 0, & otherwise \end{cases}$$

RetailerKnowledgeAdvan is the measure of Retailer Knowledge Advantage over the Brand:

$$ResellerAdvan = \begin{cases} \text{ResKnowledge} - \text{BranKnowledge}, & if\ RetaKnowledge > BranKnowledge \\ 0, & otherwise \end{cases}$$

To test Hypothesis, we further assess the multi-collinearity issue, variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance value are computed. First, the largest VIF values emerged in our study is 4.694, which are below the threshold of 10. Second, the lowest tolerance value in our models is greater than the benchmarking value of 0.1 (Hair 2006). Therefore, we can conclude that multi-collinearity did not appear to be a threat to our study. Table 4 reveals the results with standardized path coefficients, R^2 and F value.

Insert Table 4 here

Three control variables, namely firm size (β = 0.118, p > 0.1), firm age (β = -0.072, p > 0.1) and firm sales (β = -0.082, p > 0.1) were found to be insignificantly associated with retailer commitment. 0.016 per cent of the variance was explained by Model 1. In Model 2, we examined the effects of control variables, brand Knowledge of retailer, retailer knowledge of brand and brand-retailer relationship on retailer commitment. Given brand-retailer relationship (β = 0.210, p < 0.05), brand knowledge of retailer (β = 0.299, p < 0.01), and retailer knowledge of brand (β = 0.311, p < 0.01) had significant positive effects on retailer commitment, H1, H2 and H3 were supported.

In H4 we expected that the relationship between brand-retailer relationship and retailer commitment will be moderated by brand knowledge of retailer. To test the hypothesized

relationship, we added one interaction terms in Model 3 on top of Model 2. The impact of interaction between brand knowledge of retailer and brand-retailer relationship on retailer commitment was not significant ($\beta = 0.063$, $p > 0.1$). Thus, H4 is not supported.

In Models 5, this study found significant and positive three-way interaction among brand knowledge of retailer, retailer knowledge of brand managers and brand-retailer relationship ($\beta = 0.324$, $p < 0.05$). As expected, the three-way interaction model made a significant contribution over Model 4, the F hierarchical value was significant at 0.05 level. To reinforce the significant result obtained from the three-way interaction among brand knowledge of retailer, retailer knowledge of brand and brand-retailer relationship, we followed Aiken and West (1991) to conduct a simple slope analysis. The moderator of the interaction effect between brand knowledge of retailer and brand-retailer relationship (i.e., retailer knowledge of brand) were assigned the value of one standard deviation above and below its mean to indicate high and low levels. The result indicated that the conditional effect of the interaction between brand knowledge of retailer and brand-retailer relationship was highly significant at high level of retailer knowledge of brand ($t = 3.7622$, $p < 0.01$), while it was insignificant at low level of retailer knowledge of brand ($t = 0.3544$, n.s.). The results of above simple slope analysis appear in Figure 4.

Finally, the results of Model 6 revealed that brand knowledge advantage and retailer knowledge advantage both significantly impacted on the brand commitment. Specifically, the effect of brand knowledge advantage is positive ($\beta = 0.503$, $p < 0.01$) while the effect of retailer knowledge advantage ($\beta = -0.537$, $p < 0.01$) is negative. Therefore, H6 and H7 were both supported.

Insert Figure 4 here

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6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study advances B2B marketing and international marketing research by examining how MNE brands can foster commitment from local retailers in emerging markets through relationship quality and knowledge-based resources, a topic that has been rarely tested in emerging markets. Rooted in R-A theory, and complemented by RDT and interdependence theory, our findings offer both theoretical depth and practical insight.

First, our findings reaffirm the central role of relationship quality in driving retailer commitment, validating core propositions from RM theory even in the uncertain context of emerging markets. Although the positive link between relationship quality and commitment is well-established in B2B settings generally, our focus is on verifying this link in the underexplored setting of emerging economies. Specifically, most RM studies have been developed in developed markets with reliable institutions and formalized retail systems. By contrast, emerging markets feature unique conditions, for example, informal institutions and personal networks often substitute for formal market mechanisms, and MNEs must collaborate with numerous small retailers to reach consumers. We argue that these differences mean the dynamics of commitment may operate differently or with greater salience in emerging economies. By addressing this gap, our study extends the boundary conditions of RM to a new empirical setting, thereby providing fresh insights.

Second, our study moves beyond conventional RM views by integrating RDT and R-A theory to conceptualize knowledge as a critical competitive resource that shapes commitment outcomes (Elbedweihy et al., 2016; Homburg et al., 2017). We demonstrate that knowledge acquisition on both sides is essential: retailers who acquire brand knowledge, and brands that

acquire retailer-specific knowledge, are more likely to develop strong, enduring partnerships. This reciprocal exchange reflects balanced interdependence, consistent with Interdependence Theory (Scheer et al., 2014), and underscores that commitment is strengthened when both parties invest in understanding each other's operations, goals, and constraints. Our findings also extend the work of Čater and Čater (2010), who compared the influence of business relationships and knowledge transfer from an adaptation perspective. While they found that relationship strength had a greater impact than brand knowledge alone, our study adds nuance by showing that when mutual knowledge is high and relational ties are strong, the effect on commitment is even greater, suggesting a complementary interaction between knowledge and relational resources rather than a trade-off.

Moreover, our findings highlight a potential tension between relationship quality and knowledge asymmetry. Using a Hunt's R-A theory in a retailing channel context, we show that knowledge advantages can alter commitment. A brand that holds a knowledge advantage over local partners (for example, superior market intelligence or technical know-how) can more easily secure retailers' commitment. This is consistent with RDT: the less dependent (more knowledgeable) firm wields greater influence, and our results suggest knowledge-superior MNE brands can leverage that advantage to gain stronger retailer loyalty. However, if the local retailer holds the knowledge advantage, for instance, knowing more about local consumers or retailing strategies than the MNE brand, their commitment actually diminishes. This negative effect likely arises because the knowledge-advantaged retailer becomes less dependent on the brand and may perceive the relationship as less valuable or even opportunistic. This finding adds a nuanced, comparative knowledge-advantage perspective to the B2B literature: while mutual knowledge-

sharing is beneficial, asymmetries in knowledge can have a bright side or dark side depending on who holds the advantage.

Third, we found no support for H4, which predicted that a retailer's brand knowledge would directly strengthen the effect of relationship quality on commitment (two-way interaction). One explanation is that retailer knowledge alone is insufficient to enhance the relationship-commitment link unless the brand is also reciprocating with high knowledge of the retailer. In other words, retailers gaining more knowledge about the brand may raise their expectations and demands. If the brand-retailer relationship is strong but the brand does not simultaneously demonstrate deep knowledge of the retailer's needs, simply having a knowledgeable retailer might not translate into greater commitment. This aligns with the "double-edged sword" notion of brand knowledge: retailers invest effort to learn the brand, but without the brand's reciprocal understanding, those efforts could lead to frustration or unmet expectations, nullifying the moderating effect. Our significant three-way interaction reinforces this interpretation – only when both sides' knowledge is high does the relationship fully convert into commitment. Thus, H4's lack of significance actually highlights that bilateral knowledge exchange (not unilateral knowledge on the retailer's side) is what truly complements relational ties in driving commitment.

6.2. Managerial Implications

Beyond the theoretical contributions, some important managerial implications to both local retailers and MNE brand managers in emerging markets are provided. ***First***, strong brand-retailer relationships amplify the benefits of mutual knowledge-sharing, creating a synergistic effect on retailer commitment. Our study found that when both the brand and the retailer possessed high knowledge of each other and enjoyed a strong working relationship, retailer commitment was

dramatically higher. This implies that relationship quality acts as a catalyst for knowledge to translate into tangible commitment. MNE brand managers should therefore simultaneously cultivate relationship strength and knowledge exchange – one without the other is less effective. Tactics such as joint training programs, co-development of local marketing plans, and regular strategy alignment meetings can build relational trust while also transferring critical knowledge in both directions. This finding challenges any conventional assumption that either knowledge-sharing or relationship-building alone is sufficient; instead, it is their combination that yields a competitive advantage.

Second, the finding that unilateral brand-to-retailer knowledge transfer had no significant effect on retailer commitment underscores the need for two-way knowledge sharing. MNE brand managers in emerging markets should not assume that simply educating local retailers about the brand will secure commitment. Instead, they ought to foster reciprocal knowledge exchange, ensuring that retailers are well-informed about the MNE brand and that the brand actively learns from retailers' local market insights. This interdependence-oriented approach leverages both parties' knowledge bases, aligning with the idea that mutual information sharing creates a more robust partnership. For local retailers, actively sharing their on-the-ground market knowledge with the brand (rather than just receiving brand guidance) can lead to more tailored support and a stronger collaborative bond. In sum, one-sided knowledge flows are limited in impact; a balanced exchange of insights from both the brand and retailer is necessary to strengthen commitment in the channel.

Third, the results reveal that when the retailer holds a knowledge advantage over the brand, for example, possessing superior local market knowledge that the brand lacks – it can actually diminish the retailer's commitment to the MNE brand. This counterintuitive outcome highlights

the risks of knowledge asymmetry. If an MNE brand becomes too reliant on a retailer's local expertise, the power balance shifts and the brand's value to the retailer may be called into question. MNE brand managers should therefore proactively prevent or correct situations where they lag behind their local partners in market understanding. Concretely, this means investing in developing in-house market intelligence and learning continuously from multiple local sources to narrow the knowledge gap. By doing so, brand managers reduce over-dependence on any single retailer's know-how and demonstrate to partners that the brand contributes distinctive market insights. Local retailers, in turn, benefit from a brand that is knowledgeable about the market: a well-informed brand can provide better support, marketing strategy, and adaptive products, instead of merely leaning on the retailer's knowledge. Thus, avoiding extreme retailer-dominant knowledge situations, through joint planning and frequent information sharing, will sustain a healthier, more committed brand-retailer relationship.

Fourth, the analysis indicates that an MNE brand's knowledge superiority, having a greater relevant knowledge base than the local retailer, confers a clear strategic benefit, positively influencing retailer commitment. This underscores the value of MNEs building and leveraging superior knowledge resources in emerging markets. For MNE brand managers, this means that developing deep insights into consumer behavior, market trends, and retail operations (potentially exceeding what individual local retailers know) can make the brand an indispensable partner. In practice, managers might invest in robust market research, analytics, and knowledge management systems, and then share those insights with retailer partners to guide assortment decisions, promotions, and customer engagement strategies. By doing so, the MNE brand becomes a critical source of value and know-how in the channel.

Importantly, knowledge superiority should be wielded collaboratively: rather than using it to dominate, savvy MNE brand managers will use their superior knowledge to support retailers, for example, by introducing innovative retail practices or training programs that the retailer could not develop alone. This approach ensures the retailer perceives the partnership as highly beneficial, reinforcing their commitment. Local retailers, on the other hand, should recognize the advantage of partnering with a brand that brings such superior knowledge, as it can help them upgrade their own capabilities and performance. Ultimately, an MNE's cultivated knowledge advantage, if shared constructively, creates a win-win scenario: the brand secures stronger retailer loyalty and market execution, while retailers gain access to expertise and strategic guidance that enriches their business in the emerging market context.

Table 5 summarizes the hypotheses tested in this study, along with their empirical results, key theoretical contributions, and actionable managerial implications for MNE brands and local retailers operating in emerging markets.

Insert Table 5 here

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5. Limitations and Future Research Direction

Although this study advances both academic and managerial understanding by offering meaningful insights into the role of knowledge in shaping retailer commitment to multinational brands, several limitations should be acknowledged to guide future research. First, the study was conducted within a single industry in China. While China is a major emerging economy, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other contexts. Future research could test the proposed

model in different countries and across a variety of industries with diverse structural, cultural, or institutional conditions to enhance the external validity and broader applicability of the results.

Second, our theoretical contributions regarding knowledge advantage suggest several promising avenues for future investigation. For instance, future research could explore the dynamics of knowledge dependence by examining power asymmetry and mutual dependence between partners (Howard et al., 2017). Specifically, researchers might investigate the interaction of knowledge dependence across four configurations (high-high: mutual dependence; low-low: independence; high-low and low-high: asymmetrical dependence) and how these conditions influence the relationship between brand–retailer ties and retailer commitment over time.

Third, although our study collected dyadic data from both retailers and brand managers, it may still be subject to key informant bias. To address this limitation, future studies could incorporate multi-informant designs and triangulate with secondary data sources to improve the reliability and validity of the findings.

Fourth, future research could also consider the role of competitive dynamics in shaping brand–retailer relationships. This may include examining the influence of rival brands within a retailer's assortment, or rival retailers who compete to sell the same brand. Exploring these competitive pressures may yield deeper insights into how commitment is influenced by market alternatives and relational competition.

Finally, while the present study focuses primarily on the retailer's perspective as the buyer, future research could examine the brand's perspective as the seller. Understanding how MNE brands strategically manage their retailer networks for long-term growth and channel development would provide a more holistic view of commitment formation and brand–retailer co-evolution in emerging markets.

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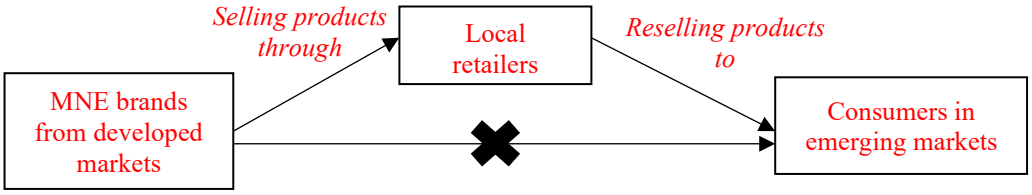


Figure 1. MNE Brands' Dependence on Local Retailers for Market Penetration in Emerging Markets

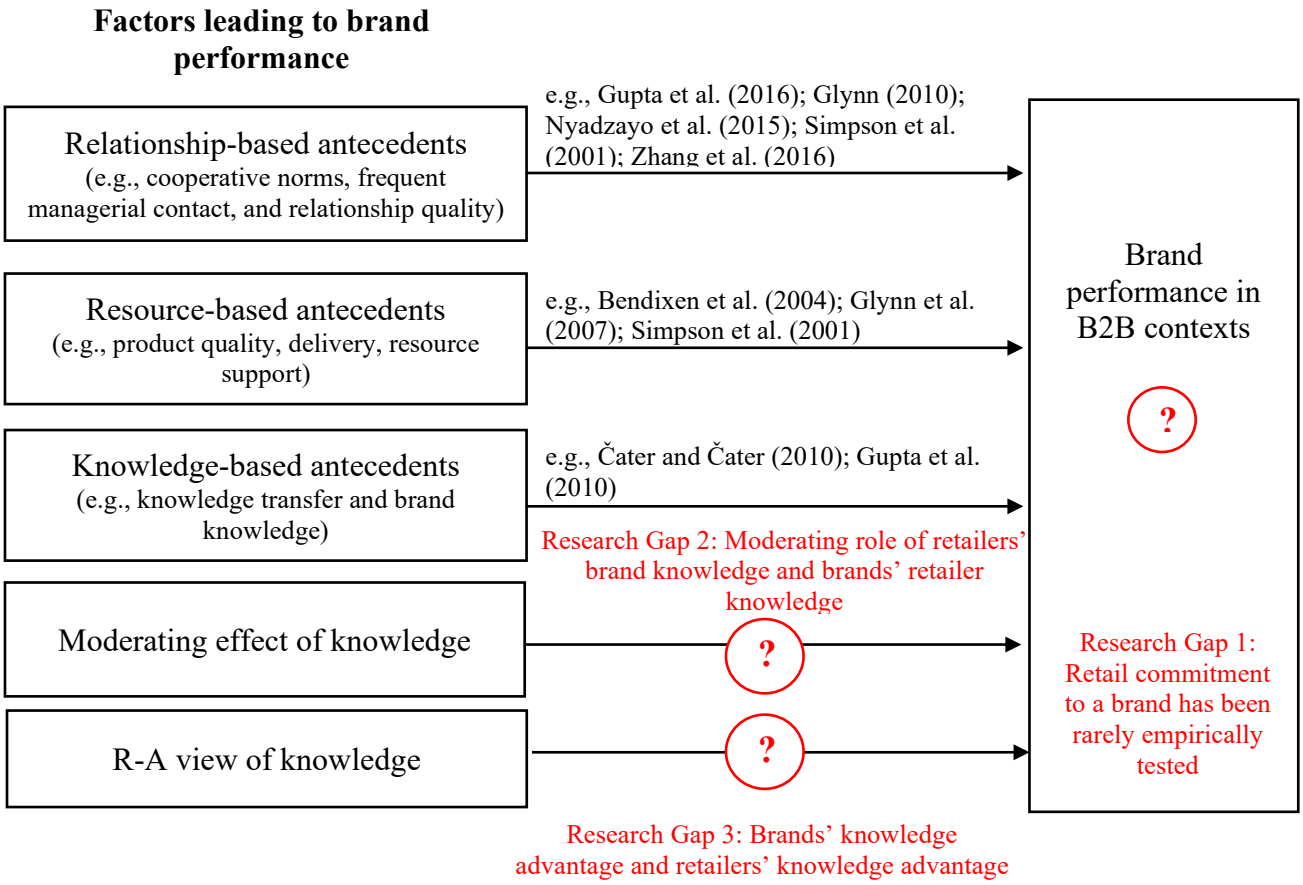


Figure 2. Visualizing the research gaps in the current literature regarding the antecedents of brand performance in B2B contexts

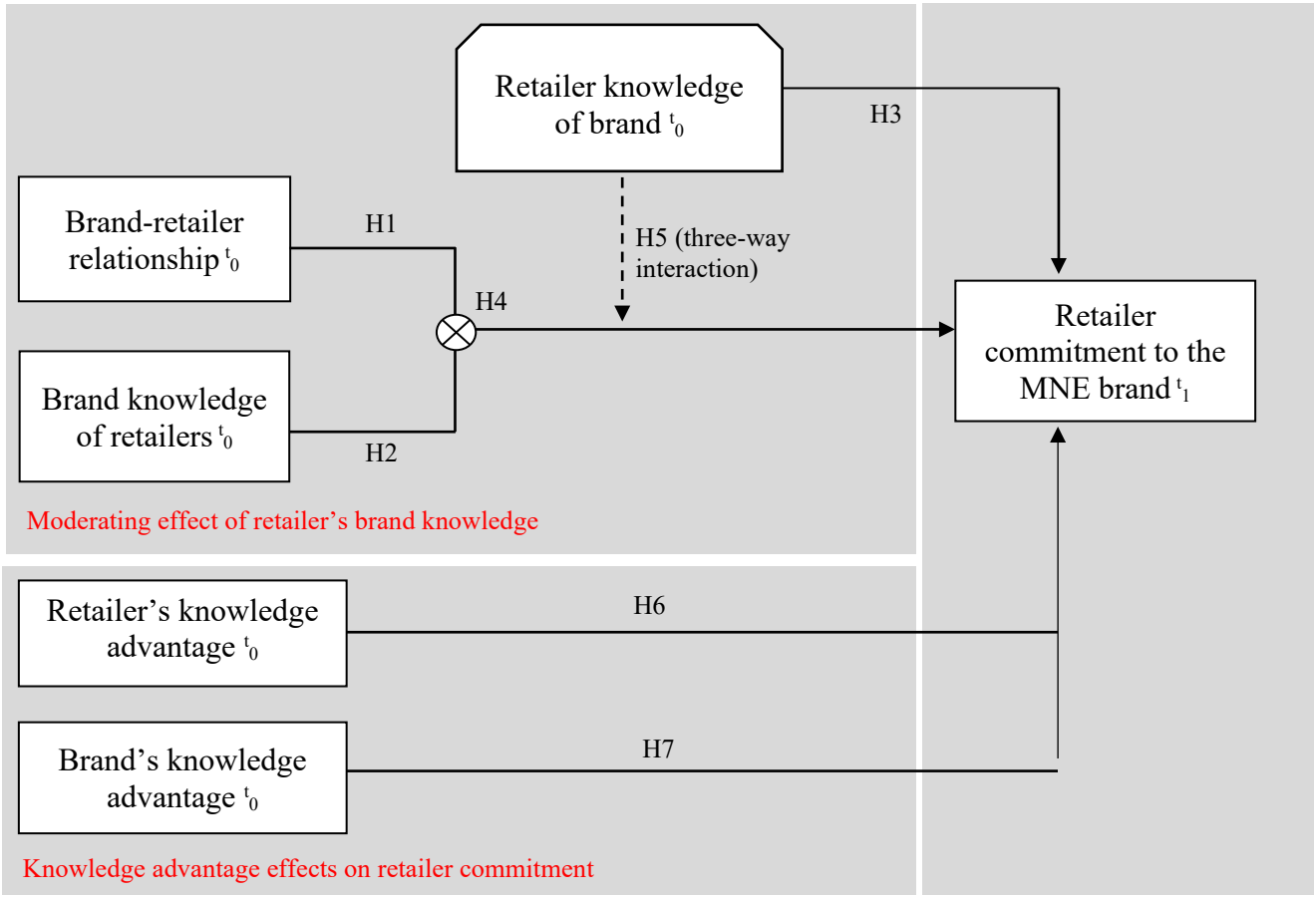


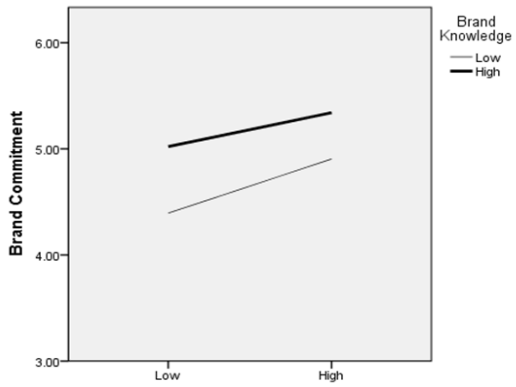
Figure 3. Research Model

T_0: Data collected in T_0
T_1: Data collected in T_1

▭: Data collected from local retailers

▭: Data collected from MNE brands

Low Retailer Knowledge (>0.1)



High Retailer Knowledge (<0.05)

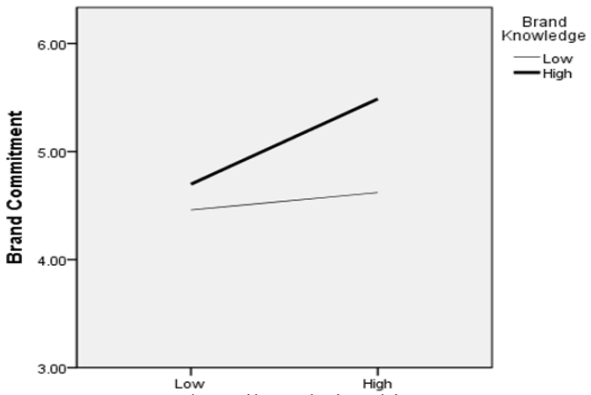


Figure 4. Simple slope analysis

Table 1
Review of Literature on Brand Management in the B2B Marketing Literature

Selected studies	Theoretical base	Research methodology	Brand performance	Drivers of successful brand in B2B relationship		
				Focus on RM view	Focus on organizational resource view	Focus on organizational knowledge view
Gupta et al. (2016)	Complexity theory	A mixed method approach; Data collected from interviews and a cross-sectional survey of retailers	Retailer brand preference	Yes	No	No
Simpson et al. (2001)	Value co-creation theory	Conceptual model developed	Retailer perceived value	Yes	Yes	No
Gupta et al. (2010)	Brand knowledge	In-depth interviews	Selection of brand by retailers	Yes (as the moderator)	No	Yes
Glynn et al. (2007)	Resource-based view	In-depth interviews	Retailer relationship outcomes	No	Yes	No
Glynn (2010)	Resource-based view	Surveys	Retailer satisfaction with brand	Yes	Yes (as the moderator)	No
Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007)	RM theory	A cross-sectional survey of advertising agencies' clients	Loyalty in B2B relationship	Yes	No	No
Nyadzayo et al. (2015)	Organizational identity theory	A cross-sectional survey of Australian franchisees	Perceived brand image	Yes	No	No
Vinhas and Gibbs (2018)	Commitment-trust theory of RM	A cross-sectional survey of retailers	Retailer commitment to the relationship	Yes	No	No
Čater and Čater (2010)	Commitment-trust theory of RM and knowledge transfer	A cross-sectional survey of purchasing managers	Commitment and loyalty in B2B relationships	Yes	No	Yes
Kim and Gilliland (2017)	Multi-theoretic perspectives (i.e., retailers' concerns and territory conditions)	A cross-sectional survey of retailers	Retailers' effort allocated toward a focal supplier	Yes	No	No

Yakimova et al. (2019)	Social comparison theory and expectancy theory	A multiple case-study research	Franchisee brand-supportive behavior	Yes	No	No
Bendixen et al. (2004)	Resource-based view	Data collected from 54 decision-makers through a face-to-face survey	Brand preference	No	Yes	No
Hughes and Ahearne (2010)	Social identity theory	Data were gathered from 18 large distributor sales organizations	Salesperson performance	No	No	No
Zhang et al. (2016)	RM theory	A six-year longitudinal data set of 552 business-to-business relationships maintained by a Fortune 500 firm.	Customer commitment	Yes	No	No
Current study	R-A theory; RDT; Interdependence theory	Dyadic survey data collected from MNE brand managers and local retailers in emerging markets	Retailer commitment to the MNE brand	Yes	No	Yes (as the moderator)

Table 2
Measurement and factor loadings for survey items

Items	Scale	St. Loadings[a]
Brand knowledge of retailers (Gupta et al. 2010)		
REK1	Aware of benefits of working with the brand	0.865[b]
REK2	Recognize customers who will demand its products	0.926 (16.609)
REK3	Able to recall product knowledge transferred by brand	0.929 (16.708)
REK4	Understand brand saleability from brand image	0.865 (14.466)
REK5	Recognize the profitability in selling the brand	Dropped
REK6	Recognize brand support in case of a problem	Dropped
Retailer knowledge of brand (Gupta et al. 2010)		
BKW1	Understand individual strengths of different retailers	0.835[b]
BKW2	Understand different business models of individual retailers	0.907 (14.572)
BKW3	Understand motivations of individual retailers	0.883 (13.813)
BKW4	Understand retailer concerns in working with the brand	0.816 (12.073)
BKW5	Understand retailer complaints about the brand	0.808 (12.054)
BKW6	Understand retailer feedback about the brand	0.750 (10.740)
Brand-retailer relationship (Abdul-Muhmin, 2005; Hausman, 2001; Walter et al. 2003)		
BR1	Frequent interaction with brand manager	0.910[b]
BR2	A personal relationship with brand manager	0.898 (17.328)
BR3	A cooperative relationship with brand manager	0.908 (17.806)
BR4	Provide support as required by the brand	0.859 (15.618)
BR5	Collaborate to achieve targets identified by the brand	Dropped
Retailer commitment to the brand (Glynn et al. 2007)		
BC1	Faith to the brand	0.910[b]
BC2	Trust in the brand	0.898 (10.263)
BC3	Dependence on the brand	0.908 (11.301)
BC4	Cooperation from the brand	0.859 (11.675)

Fit statistics: $X^2(127) = 225.213$, $p<0.001$; $\chi 2/df = 1.773$; NNFI = 0.951; CFI = 0.959; SRMR= 0.077; RMSEA= 0.071

[a]t-values from the unstandardized solution are in parentheses.
[b]Item fixed to set the scale.
Dropped indicates the item was dropped as a result of scale purification

Table 3
Mean, AVEs, Chronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Correlations

Construct	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Retailer's brand knowledge	**0.835**			
2. Brand's knowledge of retailer	0.474**	**0.897**		
3. Retailer commitment to the brand	0.563**	0.557**	**0.812**	
4. Brand-retailer relationship	0.491**	0.494**	0.484**	**0.894**
Mean	5.328	4.923	5.220	4.869
Cronbach's alpha (α)	0.941	0.933	0.932	0885
Composite Reliability	0.932	0.943	0.886	0.941

Note: square root of AVE values are in bold; **p < 0.01.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Results

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Controls						
Firm Size	0.118	0.076	0.076	0.079	0.066	0.046
Firm Age	-0.072	-0.050	-0.053	-0.061	-0.044	0.020
Firm Sales	-0.082	-0.005	-0.007	-0.003	-0.013	0.001
Main Effects						
Brand-Retailer Relationship (H1)		0.210*	0.121	0.137	0.123	
Brand Knowledge of retailer (H2)		0.299**	0.302**	0.285**	0.276**	
Retailer Knowledge of brand (H3)		0.311**	0.310**	0.296**	0.191*	
Two-way interactions						
Brand Knowledge of retailer × Brand-Retailer Relationship (H4)			0.063	0.098	0.098	
Brand Knowledge × Retailer Knowledge				-0.138	0.065	
Retailer Knowledge × Brand-Retailer Relationship				0.039	0.064	
Three-way interaction						
Brand Knowledge × Retailer Knowledge × Brand-Retailer Relationship (H5)					0.324*	
Testing the effect of knowledge advantage						
Brand knowledge advantage (H6)						0.503**
Retailer knowledge advantage (H7)						-0.537**
ΔR^2 (Brand Commitment)		0.328	0.003	0.010	0.026	0.247
R^2 (Brand Commitment)	0.016	0.343	0.347	0.357	0.339	0.263
F Change	0.783	24.312**	0.690	1.119	5.957*	19.128**

Table 5
A Summary of research findings and key contributions

Hypothesis	Results	Findings and theoretical contributions	Managerial implications
H1: In emerging markets, stronger brand–retailer relationship quality is positively associated with the local retailer's commitment to the MNE brand.	Supported	• Brand-retailer relationship remains central even in fragmented, informal retail ecosystems. • Extends RM theory into emerging market B2B settings	• MNE brand managers should invest simultaneously in strengthening relationships and promoting mutual knowledge-sharing with local retailers through joint initiatives (e.g., co-planning, training programs), as either effort alone is insufficient to maximize commitment. • MNE brands should not rely solely on providing product knowledge; rather, they must also acquire feedback and insights from local retailers to ensure reciprocal information exchange and maintain long-term commitment. • MNE brand managers should not assume that a well-informed retailer will automatically show higher commitment. Retailers may become more critical or demanding unless their knowledge is matched with the brand's reciprocal understanding. • MNEs should view relationship-building and knowledge-sharing as complementary strategies, and pursue integrated programs that reinforce both simultaneously for maximal impact.
H2: The greater the brand knowledge acquired by the local retailers, the higher the local retailer's commitment to that brand.	Supported	• Retailers' brand knowledge and MNE's knowledge about their retailers strengthen the commitment. • Reinforces the role of knowledge as a strategic intangible resource	
H3: The greater the local retailer knowledge acquired by the MNE brand, the higher the local retailer's commitment to that brand.	Supported		
H4: The impact of brand–retailer relationship on local retailer commitment is moderated by brand knowledge acquired by retailers. Specifically, the relationship is more positive when retailer brand knowledge is high.	Not supported	• Asymmetric knowledge may not improve commitment without reciprocal investment • Challenges assumptions in RM and KBV that knowledge always strengthens relationship outcomes	
H5: Three-way interaction: relationship strength × retailer brand knowledge × brand's retailer knowledge → retailer commitment.	Supported	• Demonstrates synergy between relationship quality and mutual knowledge from an interdependence perspective	
H6: Brands' knowledge advantage over retailers is positively related to retailers' commitment to the MNE brand. Specifically, when brands possess superior knowledge resources relative to retailers, retailers' dependence on these resources increases, enhancing their commitment to the brand.	Supported	• Applies R-A and RDT in an emerging market brand-retailer dyad, showing how supplier knowledge superiority enhances commitment from less knowledgeable partners.	• MNE brands should develop and leverage superior knowledge resources, and use these strategically to guide and support retailers, thereby enhancing commitment.
H7: Retailers' knowledge advantage over brands is negatively related to retailers' commitment to the MNE brand. Specifically, when retailers possess superior knowledge about local markets and consumer insights relative to brands, their dependence on the brand decreases, resulting in lower retailer commitment.	Supported	• When retailers possess superior brand knowledge, their need to commit weakens • Offers novel insight into knowledge-based dependence asymmetry	• Brands must be cautious when local retailers possess greater market knowledge. To avoid loss of influence, brands should actively close this gap by engaging in local learning efforts and collaborative planning to restore balance.