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# Governance Mechanisms in Business-to-Business Relationships: Analysis and Systematisation

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** As the increased number of studies on governance mechanisms is accompanied by a similarly increased lack of terminological consistency, the paper aims to propose a systematisation of the governance mechanisms in B2B relationships based on a systematic literature review.

**Research Design & Methods:** The paper is based on a systematic literature review of 53 papers from Scopus and Google Scholar databases.

**Findings:** Based on the detailed governance mechanisms identified in the literature, the own classification of governance mechanisms applied in B2B relationships is proposed. Concurrently with the process of analysing the detailed mechanisms in B2B relationships, the factors influencing the mix of relational, contractual and virtual governance mechanisms were investigated.

**Implications/Recommendations:** The paper contributes to the theoretical development by providing systematisation of governance mechanisms. The proposed implications are also

important for managerial practice as they systematically present the mix of available detailed mechanisms to be applied in B2B relationships depending on the company's goal and situation.

**Contribution:** The paper contributes to the theoretical development by providing the systematisation of governance mechanisms in B2B relationships. We have divided broad types of governance mechanisms into detailed types and in some cases additional subtypes. Thus, relational governance mechanisms include mutual trust, social norms and values and day-to-day contact between B2B actors. Contractual governance mechanisms cover written contracts, formal control of activities, formalisation of activities and resource investments in B2B relationships. Finally, virtual governance mechanisms include electronic integration, IT policies and procedures and handling social relationships and norms through IT.

**Article type:** original article.

**Keywords:** governance mechanisms, business-to-business relationships, systematic literature review.

**JEL Classification:** L14, L21, L22.

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## 1. Introduction

In order to establish, develop and end business-to-business (B2B) relationships, companies need to apply specific governance mechanisms, that is a set of organisational or structural arrangements used to shape, manage, and control the business partner's behaviours, business exchanges and interactions (Shahzad *et al.*, 2020; Cantù *et al.*, 2021).

In the dominant body of research on B2B relationships two main types of governance mechanisms are discussed: contractual (formal, transactional) and relational (informal) (Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Aagaard & Rezac, 2022; Ratajczak-Mrozek, Hauke-Lopes & Harrison, 2024). Contractual governance is based on short or long-term legal documents that enumerate the obligations, responsibilities, and compensations of each B2B actor (Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Bicen, Hunt & Madhavaram, 2021). Relational governance mechanisms are based among others on mutual trust and relational norms (Aagaard & Rezac, 2022; Rouyre, Fernandez & Estrada, 2024). Additionally, with the development of managerial digital solutions, a new governance mechanism was recently proposed, namely virtual (digital) governance (Jean *et al.*, 2021; Taylor, 2023) covering the extent to which inter-organisational information systems are used to coordinate business exchanges (Jean *et al.*, 2021).

In a fast-changing business environment, the choice of a particular mix of mechanisms is crucial for B2B relationship development (Shahzad *et al.*, 2020), impacting further cooperation and performance. The importance of this problem is confirmed by the rapidly growing vast research addressing it (Roehrich *et al.*, 2020). However, the increased number of studies on governance mechanisms is

accompanied by a similarly increased lack of terminological consistency, especially regarding the plethora of diverse types of detailed mechanisms and thus incoherence of the classifications used to identify and systematise them. As stated by Roehrich *et al.* (2020, p. 453), “although the concepts of relational and contractual governance in inter-organizational relationships have attracted academic and practitioner interest over the last decades, to date there have been limited comprehensive and systematic efforts to review, analyse and synthesise extant literature.” Many authors follow the well-established division into relational or contractual governance mechanisms (e.g., Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Aagaard & Rezac, 2022), while others propose their systematisations or specific types of governance mechanisms (e.g., Shahzad *et al.*, 2018; Panda *et al.*, 2023). Even when applying the division into relational and contractual governance mechanisms there is no unanimity in terms of the detailed mechanisms within these broad two types. Additionally, as argued by Rai and Surana (2022), despite research on governance mechanisms, the specifics of the interplay between them and their “proper mix” remain ambiguous. This is crucial as “different governance structures are required for different transaction goals in governing relationship(s)” (Shahzad *et al.*, 2018, p. 139). This insufficient systematisation of previous research on governance mechanisms (Roehrich *et al.*, 2020) is important as coherent classifications are needed for the sake of the comparability of research, to support analysis and theorising (Allen, Wood & Demirbag, 2022, p. 2136) and thus, to ensure methodological correctness.

To address the above-mentioned fragmentation of research and the lack of coherence in the applied classification of governance mechanisms, this paper proposes a systematisation of the governance mechanisms in B2B relationships based on a systematic literature review. Additionally, it discusses the mix of diverse types of governance mechanisms that can be used to facilitate the development of B2B relationships.

The remaining part of the paper is structured as follows. First, we present the method of our study followed by the results of a literature review on contractual, relational and virtual governance mechanisms where we discuss the identified main detailed types of each mechanism. Next, we move to our proposition of the systematisation of governance mechanisms. Finally, we explore the mix of diverse types of governance mechanisms that can facilitate the development of B2B relationships, thus forming the managerial implications.

## **2. Method of the Study**

The paper is based on a systematic literature review (Linnenluecke, Marrone & Singh, 2020; Paul & Criado, 2020) to assess the state of knowledge existing in the governance mechanisms literature. In the research procedure, we followed a three-step process including the selection of 1) the primary database, 2) keywords,

and 3) inclusion and elimination criteria (Snyder, 2019). The search was conducted using the Scopus database as it is the largest database of peer-reviewed literature. Additionally, we applied a snowball method and performed a supplementary search in Google Scholar to access the broadest scope of papers. This search was especially helpful in finding the newest papers on virtual governance mechanisms. In both searches, we used five keywords (“governance” or “mechanism” and “business-to-business” or “B2B” or “network relationship”) in the title, and/or abstract, and/or keywords of the papers. We have decided to use separately “governance” and “mechanism” for two reasons. Firstly, searching for “governance mechanism” as a single item only rendered 51 papers, most of them not linked with B2B literature. Secondly, it allowed us to identify papers addressing governance mechanisms in the text, but not highlighting it in the title, abstract or keywords. The search resulted in 1,350 papers. Next, we limited the search to the subject area of business management and accounting as well as to journal articles. This resulted in 513 papers. The following inclusion criteria covered the governance mechanisms as an important focus of the analysis (e.g., not mentioning it just once or twice) as well as the B2B focus of the paper. We have deliberately excluded papers focusing on related yet distant problems, like corporate governance or B2C governance mechanisms. Both conceptual and empirical papers were accepted. The search resulted in 53 papers for the analysis.

As part of the analysis, we identified detailed governance mechanisms discussed and/or proposed in the literature. From the beginning of the analysis, the mechanisms were grouped into relational, contractual, and virtual ones. The division into relational and contractual mechanisms is dominant within the research on B2B relationships (Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Aagaard & Rezac, 2022; Ratajczak-Mrozek, Hauke-Lopes & Harrison, 2024). Although a relatively new category, virtual governance should be distinguished because nowadays almost all business actors apply some form of IT solutions (Kamalaldin *et al.*, 2020; Jean *et al.*, 2021; Mei, Zheng & Zhu, 2022). For this stage of the analysis, we used verbatim terms for the particular names of the mechanisms used in the literature. Next, to propose a systematisation of the governance mechanisms in B2B relationships (presented in Fig. 1) we adopted the basic principle of creating classifications, meaning “order(ing) phenomena into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories” (Allen, Wood & Demirbag, 2022, p. 2135). We clustered all the detailed mechanisms found in the literature into detailed subtypes based on the analysis of their content and definitions. In the next classification stage, some subtypes were further grouped into broader categories, called types of mechanisms. The decision to adopt a two-level classification was driven by the varying levels of detail at which these mechanisms are framed in the literature. For instance, information sharing, open communication, and informal information exchange could be clustered under the broader category

of information sharing. However, information sharing itself can also be considered a key component of social norms and values.

### **3. Results of the Analysis**

#### **3.1. Classification of Governance Mechanisms Applied in B2B Relationships**

In Tables 1–3 we present detailed subtypes of three broad types of governance mechanisms (relational, contractual and virtual) investigated in the existing literature. Below we summarise the main findings.

Relational governance mechanisms are based “on the informal self-enforcement of those involved and deployed via shared norms and social relations” (Aagaard & Rezac, 2022, p. 133). These mechanisms aim at developing cooperation and lowering the risks of conflicts (Bonatto, de Resende & Pontes, 2020; Ashiru *et al.*, 2022).

Based on the literature review (see Table 1), mutual trust is the most commonly proposed detailed relational governance mechanism (Rai & Surana, 2022; Lu, Jiang & Wang, 2024). The second most commonly proposed detailed relational governance mechanism is shared social or relational norms (e.g., Aagaard & Rezac, 2022; Tannir *et al.*, 2024). Some authors distinguish additional subtypes of social norms, including information sharing, flexibility and solidarity (e.g., Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Rai & Surana, 2022). It needs to be noted that such a broad understanding and categorisation of social norms means that they cover almost all aspects of more informal cooperation within B2B relationships. This is even more crucial considering that other authors independently (from social norms), refer to such mechanisms as, open communication or informal information exchange (Lu, Jiang & Wang, 2024), which are actually linked with information sharing, idea exchange and problem-solving (e.g., Lee *et al.*, 2018; Barbieri *et al.*, 2022).

Likewise, solidarity named a social norm (e.g., Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Rai & Surana, 2022) is similar in its idea to commitment (e.g., Melander & Lakemond, 2015; Bicen, Hunt & Madhavaram, 2021), cooperative norms for improving buyers’ commitment to suppliers (Vieira *et al.*, 2023), contractual fairness (Vanpoucke *et al.*, 2022), participation (Lumineau & Henderson, 2012), cooperation and actions (e.g., Bonatto, de Resende & Pontes, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020), joint planning (Mukherjee, Musarra & Banerjee, 2023), and alignment of goals and expectations of different organizational actors (e.g., Lu, Jiang & Wang, 2024; Tannir *et al.*, 2024). These detailed relational governance mechanisms facilitate the achievement of similar goals, and mutual adaptation (Barbieri *et al.*, 2022). Social or relational norms (e.g., Bonatto, de Resende & Pontes, 2022; Mukherjee, Musarra & Banerjee, 2023) can be also linked to shared values (e.g., Lumineau & Henderson, 2012) or relationship culture (Tannir *et al.*, 2024).



Table 1 cont'd

Authors	Mutual trust	Shared relational/ social norms	Shared values	Social relations	Social norms: information sharing	Social norms: flexibility	Social norms: solidarity	Participation	Open communication	Cooperation/joint actions	Culture	Commitment	Frequent transactions	Contractual fairness	Goal/expectations alignment	Joint planning	Expectations of behaviours	Reputation	Leadership	Informal information exchange	Cooperative norms
Rai & Surana (2022)	✓				✓	✓	✓														
Rouyre, Fernandez & Estrada (2024)	✓	✓		✓																	
Sven Ivens (2004)		✓																			
Tannir <i>et al.</i> (2024)		✓		✓							✓								✓		
Wang, Fang & Li (2019)	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓									✓		
Wegner, Sarturi & Klein (2022)	✓																				
Vanpoucke <i>et al.</i> (2022)	✓													✓							
Vieira <i>et al.</i> (2023)																					

Source: the authors.

Some authors, pointing to detailed types of relational governance mechanisms, emphasise aspects related more to the day-to-day contact between B2B actors. These include the importance of social relations (e.g., Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Rouyre, Fernandez & Estrada, 2024), frequent transactions, expectations of other actors' behaviours (Melander & Lakemond, 2015), leadership (Tannir *et al.*, 2024) and reputation (Wang, Fang & Li, 2019).

Table 2. Formal Governance Mechanisms – Results of the Literature Analysis

Authors	Written contracts	Centralised control	Formalisation of cooperation	Incentives and sanctions	Specific investments	Formal information integration	Roles and responsibilities	Decision-making and structure	Articulation and alignment of goals	Resource allocation
Aagaard & Rezac (2022)	✓	✓								
Barbieri <i>et al.</i> (2022)	✓									
Bonatto, de Resende & Pontes (2022)	✓	✓								
Cao & Lumineau (2015)	✓									
Lee <i>et al.</i> (2018)	✓	✓								
Lu, Jiang & Wang (2024)	✓					✓	✓			
Lumineau & Henderson (2012)	✓									
Melander & Lakemond (2015)	✓				✓					
Mukherjee, Musarra & Banerjee (2023)	✓	✓								
Poppo & Zenger (2002)	✓									
Rai & Surana (2022)	✓									
Rouyre, Fernandez & Estrada (2024)	✓									
Tannir <i>et al.</i> (2024)							✓	✓	✓	✓
Wang, Fang & Li (2019)	✓									
Wang <i>et al.</i> (2024)	✓									
Wegner, Sarturi & Klein (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓						

Source: the authors.

The contractual governance mechanisms rely on formal contracts or written agreements (e.g., Rai & Surana, 2022; Lu, Jiang & Wang, 2024), thus allowing to minimize risks, control exchange hazards, maximize work efficiency and lower the propensity for opportunistic behaviours (Aagaard & Rezac, 2022; Mukherjee, Musarra & Banerjee, 2023). Therefore, written contracts are named as a major detailed contractual governance mechanism (e.g., Wang, Fang & Li, 2019; Rouyre, Fernandez & Estrada, 2024) (see Table 2). It is noteworthy that contacts may be

associated with other detailed contractual mechanisms which include articulation and alignment of goals (Tannir *et al.*, 2024) or formal roles and responsibilities (usually set in contracts) (Lu, Jiang & Wang, 2024; Tannir *et al.*, 2024). The second commonly acknowledged contractual governance mechanism in B2B relationships is the centralised control performed by one of the business actors (e.g., Lee *et al.*, 2018; Aagaard & Rezac, 2022). Looking at the actual activities associated with control, this mechanism can be linked to the incentives and sanctions (Wegner, Sarturi & Klein, 2022).

As an additional detailed contractual governance mechanism formalisation of cooperation is proposed (Wegner, Sarturi & Klein, 2022). This can be further discussed as formal information integration that relies on codified, structured data and rules for swift decision-making (Lu, Jiang & Wang, 2024) and is thus associated with formal decision-making and structure (Tannir *et al.*, 2024). As further detailed contractual governance mechanism Tannir *et al.* (2024) point to resource allocation and Melander and Lakemond (2015, p. 117) to transaction-specific investments that “are made when a firm has little or no use of the assets outside of a specific relationship.”

Table 3. Virtual Governance Mechanisms – Results of the Literature Analysis

Authors	Electronic/virtual integration	Access granting	Regulation of interactions	Community building	Relational norms to enhance commitment to electronic integration	IT policies and standards	Implementation of IT processes and budget controls
Hagiu (2014)		✓	✓				
Jean <i>et al.</i> (2020)	✓						
Jean <i>et al.</i> (2021)	✓						
Li, Li & Wang (2018)				✓			
Taylor (2023)	✓				✓		
Wu <i>et al.</i> (2024)						✓	✓

Source: the authors.

A third broad type of governance mechanism, namely virtual (digital) governance (Jean *et al.*, 2020; Taylor, 2023) is a response to the digitalisation of business contexts. Taylor (2023, p. 788) defines virtual governance as “a distinct form of governance that exists when two channel partners are electronically integrated via the adoption and deployment of inter-organizational technologies.” As it is a relatively new governance mechanism, the number of studies addressing this problem is limited (see Table 3). As the main detailed mechanism, electronic (virtual) integra-

tion is proposed and realised by the distribution and implementation of electronic solutions (e.g., Jean *et al.*, 2021; Taylor, 2023). Another group of detailed virtual governance mechanisms is associated with defined rules, standards and processes gained through IT tools. Here one can mention access granting and rules regulating interactions among different actors through IT tools (Hagiu, 2014), as well as IT policies and standards or implementation of IT processes and budgets (Wu *et al.*, 2024). The last group of detailed virtual governance mechanisms pays attention to the development of direct, informal relationships through IT solutions and points to community building (Li, Li & Wang, 2018) or relational norms to enhance commitment to electronic integration (Taylor, 2023).

It should be noted that not every study refers to the common distinction between contractual and relational governance mechanisms in B2B relationships, and instead, analyse them in more general terms or propose their own categorisation of mechanisms (Madhok, 1996; Jell-Ojobor, Hajdini & Windsperger, 2022; Gong, Jiang & Jia, 2023). For example, Shahzad *et al.* (2018) discuss economic and socio-logical (e.g., trust and communication) governance mechanisms. However, the thorough analysis shows that every above-mentioned detailed governance mechanism can be traced back to the division into relational and contractual mechanisms.

### **3.2. Governance Mechanisms in B2B Relationships – Systematisation**

The conducted analysis of the literature has shown that despite using mostly the same broad types of governance mechanisms in B2B relationships, there is no agreement as to their detailed classification and thus to the array of possible mechanisms actually available to managers. There is a great lack of terminological coherence and often the same phenomena are named by different concepts and types. In Figure 1, based on the presented findings of the systematic literature review, we propose the classification of governance mechanisms. For the sake of comparability with the earlier research, we also present written in italics corresponding types of detailed governance mechanisms from the earlier literature review.

### **3.3. Applying the Governance Mechanisms – the Managerial Implications**

To successfully manage B2B relationships, companies cannot rely on a single governance mechanism and need a whole mix of diverse interdependent contractual, relational and virtual mechanisms. In a similar vein, Rouyre, Fernandez and Estrada (2024) claim that the mix of chosen, specific to the B2B relationship, governance mechanisms is needed to allow its further development.

Composing “the optimal” mix of different mechanisms is demanding because “in certain situations, formal arrangements (i.e., explicit contracts) seem to have greater validity, whereas, in other situations, relational governance arrangements

are crucial” (Sjödin, Parida & Kohtamäki, 2019, p. 908). The most suitable types of governance mechanisms depend on a vast array of factors, including business environment (Sjödin, Parida & Kohtamäki, 2019), B2B relationship characteristics (Agndal, Arvidsson & Nilsson, 2023), transaction goals (Shahzad *et al.*, 2018), or the level of conflict and cooperation among B2B actors (Ashiru *et al.*, 2022).

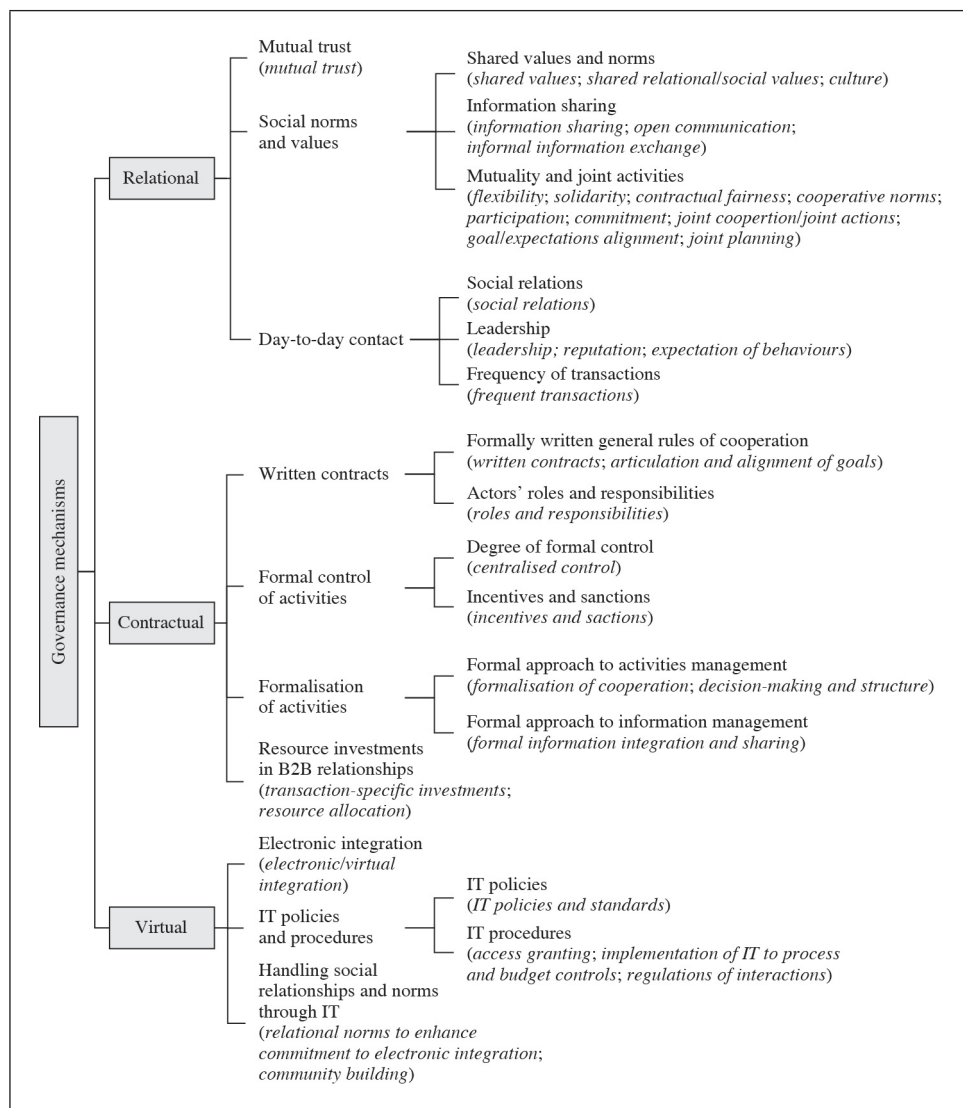


Fig. 1. Classification of Governance Mechanisms

Source: the authors.

Research shows that in turbulent, complex or conflictual environments, relational governance mechanisms should be preferred for a company's development (Sjödin, Parida & Kohtamäki, 2019) as they allow for a more flexible and collaborative approach (Bicen, Hunt & Madhavaram, 2021). Using more of a relational set of governance mechanisms, like social norms (e.g., mutuality) or trust empowered by day-to-day contact allows to improve cooperation and to better handle conflictual situations. Relying on social relations allows for quick reaction to turbulences and complexity of the external environment as relational governance mechanisms can help overcome the limitations of inflexibility inherent in contractual governance (Bonatto, de Resende & Pontes, 2022). In certain situations, B2B actors may depend on relational governance mechanisms as contracts may lack precision or may not be applicable (Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2018).

The mix of the most beneficial governance mechanisms depends also on the development stage and age of the business relationship. For example, Olander *et al.* (2010) found that both relational and contractual governance mechanisms impact R&D cooperation, their mix is similar in the development phase, while in the implementation phase, the contractual governance mechanism prevails. In a similar vein, the findings on asymmetrical relationships showed that young and small strategic networks use high levels of both formal and relational governance mechanisms. Conversely, larger and older strategic networks were observed to have high levels of relational governance mechanisms and low levels of formal governance (Wegner, Sarturi & Klein, 2022).

Additionally, when choosing the suitable mix of governance mechanisms, mutual reinforcement of relational and contractual governance mechanisms should be taken into account by managers. Contractual governance mechanisms are the source of relational governance mechanisms and vice versa. For example, Lu *et al.* (2015) found that an increased focus on contractual governance results in better relational governance and the level of relational governance grows in parallel with the extent of contractual governance. Similarly, Leischnig, Ivens and Kammerlander (2017) revealed that detailed contracts lead to enduring business relationships based on trust. A different interdependence was found by Solinas *et al.* (2022) who claim that trust, as an informal governance mechanism, complements formal governance. Finally, Aagaard and Rezac (2022) in their research showed that contractual governance mechanisms may compensate for the dysfunctions of relational governance mechanisms.

The aim of the cooperation is another factor affecting the mix of applied governance mechanisms. It may be assumed that in a short-term, project-oriented horizon, the managers are more likely to rely on formal governance mechanisms, e.g., contracts or control of activities. Still, managers may face challenges as other B2B actors may not be willing to follow demands for joint flexibility, efficiency and

adaptation of activities (Agndal, Arvidsson & Nilsson, 2023). Also, when choosing preferred governance mechanisms, the balance between the scope of coordination of partners, and the desired level of organisational openness and control are major elements the managers need to take into account (Coskun-Setirek *et al.*, 2024).

From a managerial perspective, determining access to digital solutions and the implementation of IT solutions (Jean *et al.*, 2021; Taylor, 2023) should be seen as distinct governance mechanisms introduced to manage B2B cooperation. By deciding on the distribution and access to IT infrastructure through digital solutions (Hagiu, 2014), managers resolve the scope of the cooperation with B2B partners. However, virtual governance mechanisms also may endorse the relational or contractual governance mechanisms (Li *et al.*, 2018; Jean *et al.*, 2020). In this case using IT solutions to improve the development of social networks or community building (Li *et al.* 2018) empowers relational governance mechanisms. In terms of contractual governance mechanisms, virtual ones may be used to supervise the formal procedures, processes and standards (Wu *et al.*, 2024).

#### **4. Conclusions**

The mix of applied governance mechanisms is crucial for each B2B relationship. As the cooperation and interactions are specific to every B2B relationship characteristic as well as external market conditions, managers should consciously choose among the particular mix of relational, contractual and virtual governance mechanisms. The performed systematic literature review shows that the growing interest in the governance mechanisms results in the lack of a coherent approach towards their systematisation. Therefore, the first contribution of the paper lies in proposing, based on the existing typologies, a new and simplified systematisation of the up-to-date relational, contractual and virtual governance mechanisms. The paper's second contribution is found in the managerial recommendations on the mix of governance mechanisms to be used taking into account the dynamics or development stage and age of the business relationship, the macro-environmental factors, the mutual reinforcement between relational and contractual governance mechanisms as well as the impact of the digitalisation on the cooperation.

The paper presents the outcomes of the systematic literature review and as such, lacks empirical validation. Therefore, we invite to develop our systematisation through qualitative and quantitative studies.

Despite the burgeoning research on digital business models, like digital platforms, the existing analysis of virtual governance mechanisms is scarce resulting in a significantly lower number of identified governance mechanisms. Further studies should focus on these specific mechanisms and analyse both theoretical and empirical aspects of the virtual governance.

## Authors' Contribution

The authors' individual contribution is as follows: Each contributed 50%.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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