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Social capital and organizational legitimacy as competitive advantages in the information and communications technology sector

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ABSTRACT

Information and Communications Technology Sector has been experimenting important challenges related to rapid technological changes motivated by consumers' requirements. Social capital and organizational legitimacy are considered as key assets for long-term survival and success. The main purpose of this research is to quantify the positive effects that SC and legitimacy have on customer loyalty and commitment. The results achieved through the application of PLS-SEM to treat the 986 effective responses show the positive and significant connection between the considered variables. This research contributes offering additional empirical evidence on intangible assets management and will help companies' managers to build stronger relationships with their customers.

1. Introduction

The rapid technological development reduces the products' lifecycle which become easily assimilated and duplicated by the competition (Maicas, Polo, & Sese, 2009). This situation has increased the importance of managing intangible assets to differentiate from others and achieve a sustained success (Deepphouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017; Miotto, Del-Castillo-Feito, & Blanco-González, 2020). In this knowledge era, social capital (SC) is considered as a crucial asset for those organizations that want to be efficient and competitive in the market (Blanco-Gonzalez, Díez-Martín, Cachón-Rodríguez, & Prado-Román, 2020a, 2020b). There is a clear relationship between SC and success (Gogan, Artene, Sarca, & Draghici, 2016). SC is defined as knowledge incorporated within a firm due the interactions and relationships with its stakeholders (Cricelli, Greco, & Grimaldi, 2013; Massaro, Dumay, Garlatti, & Dal Mas, 2018) and has been highlighted as a key element to differentiate from others and build advantages in the market (Youndt & Snell, 2004). Therefore, developing and maintaining solid relationships with clients based on mutual satisfaction and commitment seems crucial to improve a company's SC as well as the company's competitive position in any sector.

Organizational legitimacy is considered a significant element for organizational survival and success (Díez-Martín, Blanco-González, & Prado-Román, 2021; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Legitimate organizations can pursue their activities

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without being questioned and can avoid challenges from society (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations that are perceived as legitimate are in a better position to compete for resources (Del-Castillo, Blanco-González, & Hernández-Perlines, 2022) and have unrestricted access to markets (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Suchman, 1995). In fact, one of the most relevant advantages for legitimated organizations is the support they receive from customers which become loyal and committed to them (Han, Kim, & Kim, 2011).

Prior research on the SC field has been focused mainly on the facets of structure, relation, and cognition, however the relational component has been relatively unexplored (Chen, Haga, & Fong, 2016). Thus, it is important to identify the potential impact that SC may have on enhancing organizational legitimacy. Since SC is improved through the quality of the company's relationships with stakeholders, and stakeholder support is a key element for achieving high legitimacy assessments, the empirical introduction of legitimacy in the SC equation is relevant to test the theoretical link that can be identified. In addition, SC and legitimacy affect variables which must be managed by organizations to build and maintain lasting connections with customers (Han et al., 2011; Liu, Guo, & Lee, 2011). Within these factors, customer loyalty and commitment can be highlighted as key elements for organizational success (Bennet & Barkensjo, 2005; Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, Sassenberg, & Bornemann, 2010), showing a positive effect on customers' future behavior towards an organization (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). In fact, loyal customers will avoid switching to competitors and will be involved in the activities proposed by their organization.

Under this scenario, the main objective pursued with this research is to analyze the potential relationship between SC and legitimacy as well as the positive effects that SC and legitimacy have on customer loyalty and commitment within the Information and Communications Technology Sector (ICT) sector. The proposed model to be validated in this research, and which will generate relevant academic and management implications is presented in Fig. 1. The application of the model in the ICT sector is highly relevant due to the important dissatisfaction levels, low loyalty ratios and strong competition (Cambra-Fierro, Ruiz-Benítez, Berbel-Pineda, & Vazquez-Carrasco, 2011) present in the market. Moreover, the ICT sector has a strong socioeconomic and strategic value (Maicas et al., 2009) and is currently facing relevant challenges related to connectivity and rapid technological changes motivated by users' demands and requirements. Therefore, organizations operating in the ICT sector have important development opportunities as well as a strong pressure to keep on track with competitors (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2011; Maicas & Sesé, 2008). These companies need to constantly adapt to the on-line ecosystem and provide an adequate and high-quality offer (Maicas & Sesé, 2008), in order to avoid the constant creative destruction explained by (Schumpeter, 1942). Moreover, achieving deep and lasting customer relationships in this sector has increased its complexity since most customers are active in searching for the better offer in the market without caring from which company offers it.

The implications of this research highlight and reinforce the importance of managing SC and legitimacy if organizations expect to retain customers and achieve higher involvement and loyalty levels. Thus, the efforts developed by ICT organizations are aimed not only for achieving the client's satisfaction through the supply of attractive products and services, but for receiving social support, improving their SC and legitimacy values with the objective of achieving customers' loyalty in the long-term.

To meet the previously mentioned purpose, a review on the literature on the analyzed concepts of SC, legitimacy, commitment, and loyalty will be developed, followed by an empirical analysis applied on the Spanish ICT sector as the sample, where surveys will be developed to understand the ICT users' perceptions. Finally, the main conclusions, limitations and future research lines will be presented.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Social capital and legitimacy

Competition has increased the importance of managing intangible assets to differentiate from others (da Silva Nascimento & Sousa Júnior, 2019; Mazzucchelli, Chierici, Tortora, & Fontana, 2021). Within these assets, SC has been considered as a relevant asset due to its contribution to the generation of sustainable value and competitive advantages (Cricelli et al., 2013; Massaro et al., 2018). Researchers have tried to analyze this variable; however, no consensus has been reached on the way to define it or measure it (Grimaldi, Corvello, De Mauro, & Scarmozzino, 2017; Lin, 2021). SC includes elements related to knowledge, that contribute to innovation, value creation, competitive advantages as well as long term benefits for organizations which also represents added value for the organization's stakeholders (Sardo, Serrasqueiro, & Alves, 2018). Its main purpose is to identify elements which affect the generation and management of customer relationships (Han et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2011) through trust and identification management (Chiu, Leung, & Lam, 2009). Moreover, SC has a relevant role in relational marketing success (Bennet & Barkensjo, 2005) as well as on

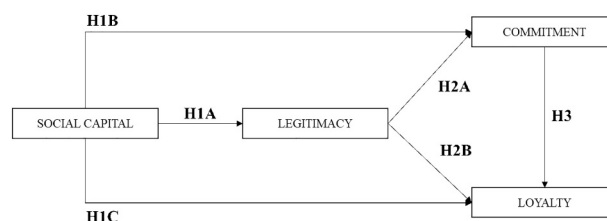


Fig. 1. SC and legitimacy as competitive advantages.
(Source: Own elaboration.)

customer loyalty levels (Walsh et al., 2010), which could result in positive purchase behaviors towards organizations (Kianto, Sáenz, & Aramburu, 2017).

SC can be defined as the overall evaluation of the relationship strength and the degree in which it fulfills the needs and expectations of the agents involved (Chiu et al., 2009). SC will be improved through the number, but mainly through the quality of the relationship with an organization's stakeholders. There are three specific dimensions of SC: structural, relational, and cognitive (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The structural dimension is the set of links generated, which includes network links, network configuration and appropriate organizations. The relational dimension is formed by relationships, it refers to the quality of relationships generated and is characterized by high levels of trust, shared norms and perceived obligations. The cognitive dimension is a shared representation of interpretations and systems of meaning (Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002).

This research focuses on the relational dimension of SC that is the quality of the relationships between members of the organization and is formed by two dimensions: trust and identification (Ahn & Park, 2018). Firstly, trust is an essential element for understanding long-term, stable, and collaborative relationships (Blanco-Gonzalez et al., 2020a, 2020b), and reducing possible uncertainty in environments where stakeholders could be vulnerable (Aydin & Özer, 2005). In turn, three dimensions are identified within trust: competence, benevolence, and honesty (Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000). Competence is related to employees' experience, talent, and skills regarding the technical knowledge of the area in which they perform their activities and that gives them the ability to offer a quality service (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Benevolence is related to all the employees involved in the relationship with the organization, seeking joint benefits and which in no case seek to harm others (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Finally, honesty refers to fulfilling the obligations and promises made, that is, a sincere performance by employees. Secondly, identification is the individual's feeling of belonging to a group and is based on the Theory of Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). They are the ones who feel unique, as group members different from members of other groups, or as members of an organization different from other organizations (Cachón-Rodríguez, Blanco-González, Prado-Román, & Díez-Martin, 2021). A positive identification of consumers with the organization improves satisfaction and commitment and reduces turnover and conflicts with the organization (Takaki, Bravo, & Martínez, 2015).

Legitimated organizations have better success and survival opportunities in competitive markets (Díez-Martín et al., 2021). Legitimacy can be considered as the conformity of an enterprise actions and activities with the general social values and norms (Del-Castillo et al., 2022). These organizations will have better access to relevant resources and will perform their activity without constant questioning and scrutiny (Díez-Martín, Blanco-Gonzalez, & Prado-Román, 2019). Legitimacy is a crucial factor for institutions since it has a clear effect on social and economic exchanges within organizations (Deephhouse et al., 2017) enforcing high responsibility levels for the enterprises involved (Blanco-González, Miotto, & Del-Castillo-Feito, 2021). Through high legitimacy levels, organizations will be perceived as credible, trustworthy and will receive support from diverse stakeholders (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Deephhouse & Carter, 2005; Díez-Martín et al., 2021). In fact, most stakeholder groups are only willing to engage with legitimate organizations and will not establish a relationship with questioned ones (Miotto et al., 2020). To receive support from stakeholders, organizations must be considered as reliable and legitimated. Therefore, when increasing its legitimacy level among stakeholders, any organization will be able to attract new customers, improve relationships with suppliers or be in better positions to attract any type of critical resource (Del-Castillo-Feito, Blanco-González, & González-Vázquez, 2019). Therefore, legitimacy is considered a key asset and a sustainable strategy for organization's survival and success due to the possibilities of improving relationships with stakeholders (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002).

Considering the concept of SC, understood as the relationships with stakeholder groups characterized by high levels of trust, shared norms, and mutual identification, it seems interesting to determine if high SC will result in high legitimacy levels, considering that for both variables stakeholders support, and trust is needed (Blyler & Coff, 2003; Chen et al., 2016). In addition, since SC can be measured through trust and identification, more connections between SC and legitimacy can be perceived in the academic field. Satisfaction has been considered by many researchers as an antecedent of customer's attitude, identification, and trust (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996). This trust feeling appears when the client has been contracting in a satisfactory manner the services of a given company (Hu, Kandampully, & Juwaheer, 2009), thus when the organization has been able to create value for this stakeholder group (Jain, Tomar, & Vishwakarma, 2016; Youcef, Djelloul, & Abderrezak, 2015). Therefore, if an organization can achieve satisfaction, it will create value for its stakeholders, thus they will become demand its activities will be considered as acceptable, correct, and appropriate resulting in high legitimacy assessments.

Furthermore, scholars have considered trust as a crucial factor to ensure the correct cooperation and social coordination (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). Academics highlight the fact that trust could reduce the opportunistic trends, which could decrease the possibilities of some firms taking advantage of other (Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000). Since trust can reduce the complexity in the decision-making process for individuals and the need of controlling organizations (Segovia, Haye, González, Manzi, & Carvacho, 2008), this variable can be considered as a support element and can have an impact on the organization's legitimacy. Through the enhancement of SC, ethical social norms and compliance with social behavioral expectations appear (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Ellinger et al., 2013). SC encourages organizations to meet social standards and thus legitimacy achievement (Schwepker Jr & Hartline, 2005).

Hypothesis 1a. *SC affects positively and significantly on the organization's legitimacy.*

2.2. Social capital, commitment and loyalty

SC relates to the affective or emotional state that a customer can hold towards the received service from an organization (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Customers' perceptions on an organization's SC will affect the client's decision of maintaining or not a

relationship with the service supplier. This decision will be highly connected with the customers' perceived value regarding the exchange with the company under consideration. Commitment and loyalty are critical assets for organizations (Currás-Pérez & Sánchez-García, 2012). When considering SC, it can be said that the higher the trust and identification level perceived by the customer, the higher the commitment level towards the relationship with the organization would be (Flavian, Torres, & Guinaliu, 2004; Takaki et al., 2015). When organizations invest in SC, higher stakeholders' commitment levels could be reached (Ellinger et al., 2013). The relationship between SC and commitment has been supported in different sectors (Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013; Liu et al., 2011; Ruffin, Medina, & Rey, 2013) as well as in the ICT sector (Danish, Ahmad, Ateeq, Ali, & Humayon, 2015; Mehmood, 2011; Schlesinger, Cervera, & Calderón, 2014; Setó-Pamies, 2012). Furthermore, SC can be considered as a crucial element to generate loyalty specially in those situations where significant risks appear (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; De Reuver, Nikou, & Bouwman, 2015; Thaichon & Quach, 2015; Van Vuuren et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 1b. *SC affects positively and significantly on customers' commitment.*

Hypothesis 1c. *SC affects positively and significantly on customers' loyalty.*

2.3. Legitimacy, commitment and loyalty

The relationships between social actors are under a transformation process, motivated by the need of prioritizing the relationships and experiences as a fundamental aspect to increase the organizations' acceptance (Miotto et al., 2020). Under these circumstances of proximity with stakeholders, organizations try to behave on a socially accepted manner according to the social norms and values to achieve social support from stakeholders and earn their commitment and loyalty (Miotto & Youn, 2020). The degree of shared values between organizations and customers have a direct impact of the latter's loyalty (Chaney & Martin, 2017). Even though the concepts of consumer commitment and loyalty has been analyzed in the literature, the introduction of the shared social values and norms (legitimacy achievement) importance to achieve it remains empirically unexplored. Legitimated organizations are perceived as trustworthy by stakeholders (Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017). The adoption of social norms may help companies to increase their legitimacy and reach social acceptance by the constituents of their environment (Chaney & Marshall, 2013; Suchman, 1995). In fact, most groups will only engage with those enterprises that are perceived as appropriate within their social system (Castelló & Lozano, 2011; Deephouse et al., 2017). Therefore, high legitimacy assessments will result in higher commitment from stakeholder groups (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Chaney, Lunardo, & Bressolles, 2016; Lee, Yoon, & O'Donnell, 2018).

Hypothesis 2a. *Organization's legitimacy affects positively and significantly on customers' commitment.*

Customer loyalty is the positive attitude of stakeholders towards the organization that makes it be their only option in their purchasing process. A loyal stakeholder does not look for alternatives, but if it needs something, it looks for it in the organization (Stangl, Kastner, & Prayag, 2017). This generates a numbers of advantages for the organization, such as the intention of maintaining long-term relationships, improving its image or reputation or benefiting from positive word of mouth (Cachón-Rodríguez, Román, & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019; Miotto et al., 2020). Obtaining legitimacy is not enough for the organization, it must share it with its stakeholders and maintain consistent and constant communication with all of them to share information in an environment where transparency and accountability are required (Del-Castillo et al., 2022). The organization must constantly "transform" that legitimacy and social support into stakeholders' commitment and loyalty (Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013).

Hypothesis 2b. *Organization's legitimacy affects positively and significantly on customers' loyalty.*

Commitment is the expressed desire to continue through the willingness to invest resources on a relationship in accordance with the client's desire to continue and reinforce the given relationship. Commitment can be considered as the differentiating factor of a successful relationship (Wu & Li, 2011). It can represent short term sacrifices to take advantage of long-term benefits (Aurier & N'Goala, 2010; Wong & Sohal, 2006). In addition, the quality of the relationship has a key role in achieving customer loyalty. Numerous researchers in a variety of fields have empirically demonstrated the relationship between quality of the relationship and customer loyalty (Macintosh, 2007; Sivaraks, Krairit, & Tang, 2011). Finally, it can be said that those customers that generally show a greater commitment level with a organization are more likely to generate a strong bond with it, involving the development of a loyal relationship between the client and the organization (Van Vuuren et al., 2012). Therefore, commitment can be viewed as a key factor for customer loyalty (Wu, 2011). This relationship has been widely studied and confirmed by scholars in a variety of fields (Alkhalwaldeh & Halim, 2016; Bricci, Fragata, & Antunes, 2016; Kandampully, Zhang, & Bilgihan, 2015; Wu & Li, 2011) as well as in the ICT sector (Danish et al., 2015; Izogo, 2016; Quach, Thaichon, & Jebarajakirthy, 2016; Thaichon & Quach, 2015).

Hypothesis 3. *Commitment affects positively and significantly on customers' loyalty.*

3. Sample and methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

The selected sample for this research has been the Spanish ICT sector due to the relevance that it has in terms of its socioeconomic and strategic value (Maicas et al., 2009). The ICT sector's annual income increased by 0,7% in 2019 and the total investment also increased by 3,8% in 2019 (CNMC, 2020). Moreover, the current competition and constant technological innovations indicates the

importance of intangible assets' management for companies operating in this sector. The ICT sector currently represents one of the most dynamic sectors in Spain and one that provides a high intersectoral impact regarding our economic development (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2011). The ICT sector in Spain is characterized by: there are no significant differences in the offers and services provided by companies; the acquisition of clients has increased its complexity; the increase in acquisition costs has extended the time frame to recover the invested resources, the demanding commercial objectives have motivated the strategies developed by companies to grab clients from the competitors; and the sector is recognized by the high rotation levels and client losses.

For collecting the data, an on-line survey was developed. Initially, a pre-test was distributed, and 50 responses were gathered with the aim verifying the scale and adapt any unclear question of the questionnaire. After the analysis of the pre-test results, a few items of the final survey were modified and others were deleted. In the final stage the number of effective responses were 986 over 1075 surveys answered (Table 1).

3.2. Measurements

The considered variables (SC, legitimacy, commitment, and loyalty) for this research were measured through adapted items from existing scales and used a 5-points Likert scale for their measurement in the survey. In Table 2 the measurement instrument is presented as well as the dimensions considered for each construct with the corresponding items and references.

3.3. Methodology

For the development of the empirical research structural equations were chosen as the methodology through the application of PLS-SEM. This methodology allows researchers to analyze the relationships between variables through the prediction of the dependent ones. The decision of implementing PLS-SEM is supported by authors such as Chin, Marcolin, and Newsted (2003) or Hair Jr, Sarstedt, Hopkins, Kuppelwieser, and V. (2014) which consider it as a technique with relevant advantages for research in which the explored issues are complex and without a large theoretical explanation about them (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017).

4. Results

To begin with, the global goodness of the model was tested for the estimated model. Considering Henseler, Hubona, and Ray (2016) the SRMR, the bootstrap quartile of SRMR, unweighted least squares discrepancy (Duls) and the geodesic discrepancy (Dg) were analyzed. The results show that the requirements of $SRMR < 0.08$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999) are fulfilled in the research model since the SRMR was 0.044. However, the criteria of goodness-of-fit tests based on bootstrap was not accomplished since, for the estimated model the following results were reached ($SRMR > HI95$ of SRMR, $SRMR = 0.044$, $HI95$ of SRMR = 0.029; $Dg > HI95$ of Dg, $Dg = 0.102$, $HI95$ of Dg = 0.043; $Duls > HI95$ of Duls, $Duls = 0.13$; $HI95$ of Duls = 0.056). Despite these results, we consider that the validity of the model is appropriate for this research based on relevant authors such as Hair et al. (2017) or even the authors of the exact model fit (bootstrapping), which consider that the PLS-SEM literature regarding exact fit measures and its application is still on an initial state. In fact, PLS-SEM has a strong predictive approach, and in this context, model fit indicators have low value and can damage the predictive power of the tool (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Gudergan, 2018).

When analyzing the obtained results from PLS-SEM, the reliability and validity of the model must be tested to verify the correct items selection for measuring the dimensions and constructs. To do so, the Cronbach's alphas, the composite reliability, the average variance extracted (AVE), as well as the standardized loadings significance must be tested in the case of the reflective (mode A) variables (legitimacy, loyalty and first order items of the SC and commitment dimensions). Table 3 presents these results, showing that the values of the Cronbach's alphas are correct since all appear over than 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In the case of the composite reliability the values presented in Table III fulfill the required value which should be over than 0.60 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Moreover, the AVE values over 0.50 are appropriate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), thus the results are correct on this matter. Finally, regarding the standardized loadings of the first order reflective items (mode A), the results presented in Table 3 show that they are all significant ($p < 0.01$).

In the case of the formative (mode B) variables (the second order constructs of SC and commitment) the collinearity (VIF) must be analyzed, as well as the standardized weights of the items/dimensions. Table 4 shows that the collinearity (VIF) values are acceptable since there fulfill the requirements of $VIF < 5$ (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). Also, every formative (mode B) dimension has a

Table 1
Technical specification of the study.

Population universe	52.506.928 clients
Sample size	986
Sampling technique	Random
Sampling error	3.12%
Method of collecting information	Online survey
Dates of information collection	From February 1st, 2020 to June 1st 2020
Sample profile	Gender: Men: 51.7%; Women: 48.3% Age: 18–24 years: 25.1%; 25–34 years: 24.5%; 35–49 years: 32.6%; 50–64 years: 16.8%; > 64 years: 1% Occupation: Student: 22.9%; Housewife: 0.6%; Employee: 69.3%; Unemployed: 5.4%; Retired: 18%

Table 2
Measurement instrument.

Variable	Item	Description	Source
SC. Identification	ID1	The service offered by your operator cover the needs better than competitors	Ahn and Park (2018); Blanco-Gonzalez et al. (2020)
	ID2	I consider the success of my operator as my own	
	ID3	I feel that I am involved with my operator	
	ID4	When someone speaks well of my operator, I feel proud	
SC. Trust	HON1	Your operator is transparent with its service offer	Ahn and Park (2018); Blanco-Gonzalez et al. (2020); Flavián and Guinalfú (2006); Lassala et al. (2010); Madjid (2013)
	HON2	Your operator always fulfills the norms	
	HON3	Your operator fulfills the promises made to the clients	
	BEN1	The services recommended by your operator consider the mutual benefits for the clients and themselves	
	BEN2	Your operator cares about the future benefits of their clients	
	BEN3	Your operator would not make decisions to harm their clients	
	COM1	Your operator is competent to offer the services in an efficient manner	
Legitimacy	COM2	It has enough experience to provide the service with the ability to solve problems	Deephouse and Suchman (2008); Díez-Martin et al. (2020); Miotto et al. (2020)
	COM3	Your operator knows its clients to make offers adapted to them	
	LEG1	What is the legitimacy level of your operator	
Calculated commitment	CMP1	Would you maintain the services with your actual operator because changing will represent a cost and effort	Fullerton (2011), Baptista and León (2013), Quero and Ventura (2011)
Commitment. Affective	CMP2	Would you maintain the services with your actual operator because you agree on the way it performs its activity	
Commitment. Normative	CMP4	Would you support your operator if others criticize it	
	CMP3	Would you maintain the services with your actual operator even though you would receive a promotional gift from a competitor	
Loyalty	LEA1	Would you contract again the service of your operator	Lassala et al. (2010), Madjid (2013)
	LEA2	If someone asked for advice, would you recommend your operator	
	LEA3	Would you continue with your actual operator even though you would have to pay higher tariffs than with a competitor	

Table 3
Measurement model reliability and validity (1st order).

Factor	Item	Weights/Loadings	T-Value	CA	CR	AVE
SC. Identification	ID1	0.78	48.49	0.88	0.92	0.74
	ID2	0.87	82.26			
	ID3	0.89	132.57			
	ID4	0.90	132.67			
SC. Trust. Honesty	HON1	0.92	156.16	0.90	0.94	0.83
	HON2	0.91	112.42			
	HON3	0.90	120.16			
SC. Trust. Benevolence	BEN1	0.92	139.82	0.87	0.92	0.79
	BEN2	0.89	109.08			
	BEN3	0.86	70.20			
SC. Trust. Competence	COM1	0.87	81.37	0.83	0.90	0.75
	COM2	0.89	97.29			
	COM3	0.84	68.86			
Legitimacy	LEG1	1.00		1.00	1.00	1.00
Calculated commitment	CMP1	1.00		1.00	1.00	1.00
Affective commitment	CMP2	0.92	135.54	0.82	0.92	0.85
	CMP4	0.93	174.64			
Normative commitment	CMP3	1.00		1.00	1.00	1.00
Loyalty	LEA1	0.93	201.76	0.85	0.91	0.79
	LEA2	0.92	168.71			
	LEA3	0.78	52.11			

CA: Cronbach Alpha; CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extended; VIF: Value Indicators Factor.

significant effect ($p < 0.01$), over their second order variable.

In addition, for reflective (mode A) items, the discriminant validity must be analyzed. For this matter, the HTMT ratio is presented in Table 5 since authors such as (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015) have consider it as a relevant method to address the discriminant validity requirements. The obtained results on this matter show that every ratio fulfills the criteria of being lower than 0.90 (Gold, Malhotra, & Segars, 2001).

Based on the previously presented arguments, the considered measurement model for this research meets the requirements in terms of reliability, convergent and discriminant validity for reflective (mode A) variables as well as regarding the collinearity and wight-

Table 4
Measurement model reliability and validity (2nd order).

Factor	Item	Weights/Loadings	T-Value	VIF	CA	CR	AVE
SC	Honesty	0.39	9.51	3.77			
	Benevolence	0.30	8.16	3.26			
	Competence	0.05	2.00	1.56			
	Identification	0.40	12.45	2.06			
Legitimacy	LEG1	1.00			1,00	1,00	1,00
Commitment	Calculated	-0,04	1,59	1,18			
	Affective	0,87	43,36	1,53			
	Normative	0,25	9,81	1,47			
Loyalty	LEA1	0,93	201,76		0,85	0,91	0,79
	LEA2	0,92	168,71				
	LEA3	0,78	52,11				

CA: Cronbach Alpha; CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extended; VIF: Value Indicators Factor.

loading relationship and significance for the formative (mode B) ones. Regarding the proposed hypotheses, the achieved results confirm the positive and significant relationship between them. In addition, the R2 coefficient indicates that the analyzed model has a high predictive power since every value is over 0.5. The Q2 value also shows a positive predictive relevance since every value is higher than 0.3. Finally, the F2 statistic (Cohen, 1988) was including showing medium and large effect (>0.15) sizes for every value, except for the relationship between legitimacy and loyalty that has a smaller effect (>0.02). The detailed results are presented in Table 6.

5. Discussion and implications

The current competitive landscape as well as the rapid technological development which reduces the products' lifecycle as well as company's abilities to differentiate has increased the importance of managing intangible assets to outstand from others. The Spanish ICT sector is considered a highly competitive and mature sector where attracting new clients has become a complicated task (Maicas et al., 2009). Therefore, companies operating in this sector need to develop the correct strategies to build and maintain valuable relationships with their stakeholders to survive and succeed in the market as part of a sustainable strategy.

SC has been highlighted by researchers as a relevant intangible asset to differentiate from competitors and build advantages in the market (Youndt & Snell, 2004). It is considered the knowledge incorporated within a firm due to the interactions and relationships with its stakeholders, therefore, aspects such as satisfaction, trust, commitment or loyalty have increased their importance since these variables have a clear effect on the quality of the relationships with the given groups (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Walsh et al., 2010). Moreover, under this competitive scenario, the introduction of legitimacy management as part of an organizations' sustainable strategy can determine the company's success and long-term survival.

Under these circumstances, the aim of this paper was to empirically demonstrate the relationship between SC and legitimacy, as well as the effect that both variables have on customers' loyalty and commitment in the ICT sector. The relevance of identifying the described relationships appears, first, in providing additional empirical evidence on a relatively innovative field, since not enough empirical research appears on testing the relationship between each of these variables and legitimacy. And second, as it has been previously stated, the current competitive landscape has increased the need of intangible assets management to differentiate from competitors. Since the ICT sector is considered a mature sector where attracting new customers has become difficult, companies need to identify manners to build and maintain lasting relationships with their clients as part of a sustainable strategy.

Regarding the obtained results the following conclusions can be highlighted. First, when considering the measurement scales analyzed for this research, every item used to measure the considered variables as well as all the dimensions for the second order constructs were significant. Therefore, the measurement instruments of SC (trust and identification), legitimacy, commitment and loyalty were confirmed through this research. Second, regarding the structural model, all the proposed hypotheses were confirmed. A positive and significant relationship was confirmed between SC and legitimacy. These results were already supported by authors in the field (e.g. Chen et al., 2016; Ellinger et al., 2013). Therefore, when companies are able to improve the quality of the relationships with their customers thought their ability to fulfill their needs and expectations, these groups will support the organization and consider them acceptable and necessary within their social system. In the ICT sector where competition is high and the churn rates too, being considered legitimated will ensure the service operator survival and success in the long-term.

In addition, the results show the positive and significant effect of SC on commitment and loyalty. In the case of SC and commitment authors such as Flavián and Guinalfu (2006), Takaki et al. (2015) or Ellinger et al. (2013) supported the positive link between both variables in their research. These results show that being perceived as a trustworthy organization and receiving higher levels of customer identification will have a positive impact on the level of commitment from customers. Regarding the relationship between SC

Table 5
Discriminant validity (HTMT).

	F1	F2
F1 Legitimacy		
F2 Loyalty	0.73	

Table 6
Hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses	Beta	T-Value	F ²
H1a. SC -> Legitimacy	0.73	45.02	1.15
H1b. SC -> Commitment	0.70	27.44	0.79
H1c. SC -> Loyalty	0.34	10.90	0.17
dH2a. Legitimacy -> Commitment	0.13	4.60	0.03
H2b. Legitimacy -> Loyalty	0.13	5.13	0.16
H3. Commitment -> Loyalty	0.46	14.98	0.32
R^2 (Legitimacy) = 0.53; R^2 (Commitment) = 0.64; R^2 (Loyalty) = 0.74			
Q^2 (Legitimacy) = 0.53; Q^2 (Commitment) = 0.33; Q^2 (Loyalty) = 0.57			

and loyalty, the obtained results go in line with previous investigations (e.g. Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Van Vuuren et al., 2012), showing the importance of SC to achieve customer loyalty specially in a sector with high churn rates and where maintaining customers is a very complex matter.

When analyzing the effect that legitimacy has on commitment and loyalty, a positive and significant connection was also discovered. Some scholars have mentioned these relationships, at least in a theoretical manner in their research (e.g. Lee et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2013). Considering that legitimacy is the level of social support and acceptance received by an organization, customers will be more commitment with a company that is perceived as appropriate and acceptable in the system where it operates. Thus, companies operating in the ICT sector must ensure they achieve positive legitimacy levels to benefit from a loyal customer portfolio. Legitimated service operators will benefit from competitive advantages associated with lasting relationships with clients.

Finally, when considering the effect of commitment over loyalty the significant and positive relationship was also tested by several scholars (e.g. Alkhawaldeh & Halim, 2016; Jain et al., 2016). This confirmation highlights the importance of being consistent in the relationship with customers since their long-term commitment will end up becoming loyalty.

Regarding the main implications for companies' managers the following arguments could be highlighted. First, this research expects to provide a wider view of the ICT sector in Spain with the aim of understanding customers' behavior to provide managers with tools for the correct relationships' management. The confirmed hypotheses on the model can serve as guidance for managers to improve the relationship with their clients and as a result improve the company's survival and success opportunities. The improvement of the quality of the relationship between ICT companies and their customers will determine the SC value for this firms. When considering the effect of SC on the legitimacy, improving the organization's SC through better clients' satisfaction, trust levels and customer identification will help the organization to gain its right to exist and attract additional stakeholders, since most of them are only willing to engage with legitimated institutions. In the aim of managing their legitimacy, managers should focus on understanding their clients' needs and improving the relationship with them, since as it has been supported with this research, these actions if perceived properly, would have a positive effect on their legitimacy level.

Company's managers should understand that to improve their commitment and loyalty ratios, they must ensure a high SC and legitimacy level since customers will become committed and loyal to organizations that offer quality and value to their stakeholder groups. Also, this willingness of customers to engage with companies is highly related to their perceptions on their acceptability and appropriateness. Thus, managers must behave ethically focusing on understanding the client's needs and requirements if they expect to justify their companies' right to exist.

Considering the strong competition levels in the ICT sector, as well as the difficulty that organizations face when trying to achieve loyal customers, this research results achieved will be deeply useful if managers apply them in their customer relationship management strategies. ICT companies must set the correct management of their intangible assets such as SC and legitimacy through the improvement of the relationships with their clients as their priorities.

Finally, regarding the main limitations and future research lines the following points could be discussed. First, the analysis has been done without segmenting the sample according to demographic variables such as gender, age, occupation etc. nor introducing different stakeholder groups to make a comparison. Next, the analysis has been performed on a specific sector and in one country. Therefore, future research lines would be related to improve the described limitations: A multistakeholder analysis could be developed considering internal and external stakeholders and comparing their perceptions; to reply a similar analysis in other sectors, within the service industry to compare the obtained results; and to develop a similar analysis on a different country to analyze the diverse results depending on the country where the users are selected from. In addition, within the model, more indirect relationships regarding intangible assets could be analyzed, therefore, future researchers could focus on analyzing them in depth.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Cristina Del-Castillo-Feito: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Alicia Blanco-González:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Francisco Díez-Martín:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Gabriel Cachón-Rodríguez:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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