Stephan C. Henneberg, Ph.D.

Chair Professor of Marketing and Strategy
Director Business Ecosystem Research Group

School of Business and Management
Queen Mary University of London
Bancroft Building
Mile End, London E1 4NS
Email: s.henneberg@qmul.ac.uk
Tel.: +44-(0)207-8822706
s.henneberg@qmul.ac.uk

Report of member of Thesis' Council on the thesis

"Assessing consumer perception of brand alliances"

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by Daniil Vladimirovich Muravskii

at Saint-Petersburg State University.

Viva Report for PhD submission

Daniil V. Muravskii:

ASSESSING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONOF BRAND ALLIANCES

Prof. Stephan C. Henneberg, PhD

(Queen Mary University of London)

Outline

The dissertation tackles the issue of brand alliances, in particular how they are formed by a focal company (company perspective) and how they are perceived by the customer (customer perspective). To this purpose, the dissertation provides a conceptual develop of the company perspective, followed by an experimental empirical study to get to grips with the customer perspective. 300 25-35 year old probands are used, and data is analysed via regression analysis.

Assessment

Overall, the study is written in good English, with appropriate use of academic terminology. The phrasing is sometimes a bit awkward and shows a non-native speaker (or proof editor). At some points in the storyline, this leaves certain aspects unclear or opaque. However, the argument progresses well, relevant literature is used throughout and in an appropriate way. Theory development and empirical tests are done to a standard required from a PhD dissertation. While the dissertation has a clear contribution and interesting results, addressing a timely and important issues, it is not always clear with regard to the integration of the two perspectives (customer and company perspective) and therefore reads often as a work of two characters. These are not important criticisms bearing in mind the overall quality of the work, however, in my 'specific areas of discussion' I outline some of the issues which could be tackled (also as part of the viva) to make this an even better dissertation.

Specific Areas of Discussion:

Introduction

The introduction generally provides a good overview and motivation of the topic of brand alliances. However, the framing of the dissertation focusses immediately on issues around what seems to be a B2C issues, without considering the general importance of brand alliances. This could also include B2B aspects. While there is nothing wrong with situating the issue in the B2C sphere, this needs to be argued and introduced. Sometimes the concept of 'brand alliance' seems to be overplayed, e.g. in cases of celebrity endorsement by Michael Jordan for Nike a brand alliance is arguably a secondary issue.

The overall title of 'consumer perceptions' seems to me too vaguely argued (as also the company perspective is relevant for the argument). Furthermore, a more rigorous justification of perceptions as focal outcomes (and not behaviours) would need to be provided. Different brand alliances may have different aims, some may be relevant for brand awareness (a perceptional issue), while others are aimed at increased purchasing (a behavioural issue). The aims of brand alliances seem to have been omitted from the framing in the introduction. Overall, it remains a bit unclear what the main contribution of the study is: what is the 'system' which is being referred to on p. 5? An integration of 'company and customer perspective'? How does this advance our knowledge? An overview table of existing literature and what it does, juxtaposed with what this dissertation aims to do, would have been a better way to describe the contribution *vis-à-vis* existing literature. Objectives of the study are not always clear, e.g. on p. 5 it states the primary focus as "potential benefits and risks for the company associated with brand alliances formation, as well as on the criteria for choosing partners with a high brand fit as the necessary condition for forming successful alliances." This implies a focal company perspective, however, the study is (also, and empirically, mainly) based on a customer perspective (see the 'subject' definition). Are these perspectives integrated, and through which mechanisms? P. 6 outlines the specific aims (and associated 'tasks'), which are a bit varied and wide, and would need to be integrated by a clear objective, and could be linked to clear contribution statements. P. 7/8 are not contributions but merely 'summaries' of findings. This could be elevated to a higher level argument (see also comments on the conclusion).

Chapter 1

Brand alliance formation is a problematic core concept. The core explanandum is the effect of brand alliances on customer perceptions. Thus, the 'formation' is an adjacent issue, not the foundational concept at the heart of the argument.

The progression of the argument is good, and figure 1 (and similar figures thereafter) provides a nice structure. The terminological discussion is a bit long-winded and does not provide too much of a contribution. The main definition of brand alliance (and its delineation from co-branding) is more confusing than helpful: "Therefore, a brand alliance is a form of cooperation of two or more brands, and cobranding is an activity that results in the formation of brand alliances."(16). Possibly this makes sense if you change 'in the formation' to 'from the formation'. Co-branding as an antecedent to brand alliance formation does not make much sense to me (see the extensive literature on alliance formation capabilities, in which activities are 'outcomes', not theoretical antecedents).

While in the following some interesting discussions on narrow/wide interpretations are used, the section also seems to conflate co-branding and brand alliances again (after they had been distinguished before). Pages 22-42 onwards (including the brand alliance 'model') provide an interesting read but seem, in the context of the dissertation, a bit of a detour, as if a 'stand-alone' article has been shoe-horned into the argument. I am unsure about the storyline and the link with subsequent arguments (maybe again an issue of a missing overarching framework, integrating company and customer perspectives?).

Focus on brand equity: while the discussion of this issue is sound, again I am missing the link with consumer perceptions here. Brand equity is a company-focussed construct, which needs to be linked and integrated with a customer perspective, i.e. individual perceptions. How is this link made, what is the theoretical foundation for this? The 'brand knowledge' model of Keller is a very simplistic theoretical foundation; more recent literature could be used.

1.2.2 on brand equity again looks like an unnecessary detour. Figure 8 is a nice integration but the discussion around it seems to imply that this represents a 'model'. For that it is not developed and grounded enough, and mechanisms are not clear enough. It represents more of a framework. I also miss the link to chapter 2, i.e. the integration with a customer-based perspective. An overarching framework would be needed before the two sub-components (i.e. company-based perspective and customer-based perspective) are situated within. Such a framework would also have to provide a theoretical reasoning for integrating both perspectives (figure 8 cannot do this).

Chapter 2

As previously outlined, the link between chapters 1 and 2 is not fully convincing. The change of perspective is not fully embedded in a model or theoretical frame. Model definition (p. 64) needs further elucidation (e.g. a model contains a definition of relevant concepts/variables used, including justification of those not used; a description of simple/complex causality between the concepts; detailed mechanisms underpinning the causality...which result often in hypotheses; boundary conditions).

The underlying model uses several independent variables which stem from very different theory groups (called 'prerequisites'?). This is uncommon and problematic, if their use is not explained in a)

an overarching theoretical framework, or b) the commensurability of each of the different theories with each other is outlined. Neither is done in this context; each concept (and associated theory group) is used in isolation.

Concepts on the dependent side seem to be 'changes', i.e. incremental aspects due to the brand alliance of the focal brand with another brand. Such changes (i.e. deltas) need to be clearly disentangled from any underlying effect (i.e. there exists a focal brand attitude perception but what is relevant here is the incremental change in brand attitude perception of the focal brand due to its brand association with a partner brand). Phrasing does not always make these issues clear. Figure 11 (and 12 etc.) is opaque and does not provide any further elucidation of the issue at hand.

Dependent variables: it is unclear what the 'assumptions' mentioned are. Do they serve as hypotheses? If yes, they are not fitting with the model, e.g. "brand alliance formation with a high-fit partner leads to a stronger increase in brand knowledge than with a low-fit brand" (p. 73). Brand knowledge is not a dependent concept in the model, i.e. it is unclear how it fits with the overall argument (this problem is consistent for all 'assumptions'). Furthermore, the distinction between brand fit (similarity between alliance offerings) and congruence of brand associations is unclear. The definition of the congruence concept ("consumer's perception of the similarity of the images of partner brand participating in the alliance with the original images of the brands prior to the alliance", p. 74) is opaque and possibly nonsensical (is this only 'partner brand' relevant, or should it read 'partner brands'? If yes, is the congruence between each brand before/after alliance, or combined..?).

The overall model (figure 82) is based on an independent concept called brand alliance formation. However, this concept was not discussed in the previous sections on independent variables, not does it feature in figure 10 (schematic of model logic) or table 9 (overview of model variables). What is it? If this is unclear, it remains unclear why the moderators are moderators (and not in fact antecedents). There are also some incorrect (or language-based) errors in the descriptions of model relationships (e.g. number of partner brands seems to imply the number of usages of co-branding (i.e. "several times"), thus the concept is interpreted as 'number of co-branding usages', not number of partner brands.

P. 84: the 'As' (Assumptions?) do not fit the model, e.g. "A1. Brand alliance formation has a positive effect on brand knowledge": figure 15 has no brand knowledge in it; neither has figure 16 which represents a causal model. Brand knowledge is then disaggregated into attitudes to brand/spillover as 'sub-concepts' which form the hypotheses. As such, this means that not the hypotheses are argued, but only some wider framework. Figure 16 also has a new 'dependent construct', i.e. market/financial results. This is not in previous models/schematics. In one word, it is difficult to match hypotheses/assumptions, figures, schematics, etc. easily. In my view, this needs a bit of 'cleaning up' to ensure consistency.

Chapter 3

The empirical method is well introduced and set up. The experimental design is well chosen and developed, and the experimental stimuli are appropriate and well designed. Sample: limited to a very small age group (25-35 old). There is no justification for this, and it makes the overall design look too much like a 'convenience sample'. An 'n' of 300 is appropriate for 10 experimental groups (although on the low side).

Variable operationalisation: Brand attitude is conflated with purchase intention. This is conceptually problematic, as attitudes precede intentions. As such, the operationalisation clashes with established psychological models (e.g. Theory of Reasoned Action/Planned Behaviour) and would need a much better justification.

In terms of measurement model analyses, I would like to see EFA and CFA results. CFA is mentioned but now fully described. The choice of analysis methods is appropriate but the reasoning could be more detailed, e.g. regarding alternatives, pros and cons, etc. Mediation, for example, could have been done with the Preacher/Hayes (2008) method, which is more robust than the chosen method.

Conclusion

The conclusions are good but remain a reiteration of the results. This leaves the contribution to reside on 'first level', without reaching a 'second level', i.e. become more wide-ranging. The two perspectives (focal company/customer) remain 'standing beside each other'. Here an integration (also in terms of 'so what's') could have been done. I am also missing a limitation and further research discussion which clearly shows reflections on the study at hand and its results.

Bibliography/appendix

The format of the bibliography is non-standard (possibly a requirement of the host university). The appendix is very helpful and appropriate.

Overall Assessment

The dissertation has undeniable strengths: the empirical design and analysis; the diligence in using sources. It also has some weaknesses: the theoretical frame (non-integration of two perspectives); the inconsistencies in presentation of model/constructs. However, **overall the dissertation is of a good standard, and I therefore recommend without hesitation to accept this thesis.**

The thesis submitted by Daniil Vladimirovich Muravskii "Assessing consumer perception of brand alliances" corresponds to the requirements by the decree from September 01 2016 №6821/1 "On the procedure of the award of the scientific degrees at Saint-Petersburg State University". The candidate therefore deserves to be granted with the scientific degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Economics, specialty 08.00.05 (кандидат экономических наук по специальности 08.00.05 – Экономика и управление народным хозяйством (маркетинг)).

Member of Thesis' Council
Doctor of Philosophy in Marketing
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School of Business and Management

Queen Mary University of London, 28th August, 2017
Prof. Stephan C. Henneberg