

“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in International Journal of Advertising on 30/11/2021, available online:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02650487.2021.2003668>.”

# **Engaging Allies for Better or Worse: Investigating the Relationship between Multiple-Brand Alliances and Persuasion Knowledge**

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This research has been conducted with financial support from St. Petersburg State University, (grant ID 38011586).

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# **Engaging Allies for Better or Worse: Investigating the Relationship between Multiple-Brand Alliances and Persuasion Knowledge**

Existing attempts to explicate the impact of multiple-brand alliances on consumers' perceptions have delivered contradictory insights: brand alliance researchers consider such impact as positive, while celebrity endorsement researchers conceptualize it as negative. This study addresses the reasons for this discrepancy by approaching persuasion knowledge theory. To test the hypothesized relationships, we conducted an experiment on 300 consumers, which explicated the negative impact of persuasion knowledge on consumer multiple-brand alliance advertisement attitude and post-alliance focal brand purchase intention. Empirical analysis revealed that consumer persuasion knowledge in brand alliances has a negative impact on purchase intention and focal brand attitude. Increasing the number of brand allies by one reduced the impact of persuasion knowledge and contributed to a stronger brand consideration.

## **Introduction**

Brand alliances (BAs) can be defined as the simultaneous representation of different brands to consumers (Newmeyer, Venkatesh, and Chatterjee 2014; Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999). Such alliances often result in cooperation between more than two brands, which can be referred to as multiple-brand alliances (MBAs). MBAs may take a variety of forms: joint promotion (e.g., Raffaello treats share joint promotional stands with Baileys liqueur and Ferrero Rocher treats), creation of joint products (e.g., Milka chocolate bars with Tuc crackers, Lu, or Oreo cookies), cooperative loyalty programs (e.g., American Airlines with Best Western, Comfort Inn, and Marriott Hotel chains), co-location (e.g., KFC, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell share facilities at food courts), celebrity brand endorsements (e.g., golfer Tiger Woods has endorsed Nike, ATandT, and Gillette), or bundling multiple products together (e.g., Martini-Schweppes and Martini-Coke drink bundles).

It can be inferred that the formation of BAs, which are accompanied by physical product integration, would require more financial obligations and managerial efforts related to R&D, the modification of manufacturing facilities, and reorganization of associated processes for all of the brand allies' producers (Wu, Choi, and Park 2020; Karray and Sigué 2018). This could explain the wide spread of symbolic brand alliances (such as joint advertising, celebrity brand endorsement, and sponsorship), which can equally stand as a central element of a marketing campaign and also supplement the introduction to the market of physically integrated brand alliances (Newmeyer, Venkatesh, and Chatterjee 2014). Such alliances are generally formed to improve consumer perceptions, and guide managers' hopes towards positive spillover effects. However, although empirical evidence has confirmed these positive effects (e.g., Voss and Gammoh 2004; Varadarajan 1986), there has also been contradictory evidence, such as a lack of marginal value of adding a second brand ally (e.g., see Gammoh, Voss, and Fang 2010) and decreased post-alliance attitudes and purchase intention for multiple-brand endorsements (e.g., see Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012).

In the current study, we suggest that the inconsistencies in existing research can be explained by the rather overlooked effects of consumer persuasion knowledge. Persuasion knowledge (PK) is the knowledge and beliefs consumers use to resist marketers' persuasive attempts to change their attitude or behavior (Friestad and Wright 1994). According to extant studies, introduction of a new marketing tactic (e.g., the promotion of several brands in one ad) may lead to inferences of manipulative intent of the marketer (Peng et al. 2016; DeCarlo, Laczniak, and Leigh 2013; Lunardo and Mbengue 2013). Thus, the effect of BA on focal brand consideration might be indirect, mediated by consumer PK and its negative impact on brand choice. Existing research on the potential negative outcomes of BA exposure (e.g., Chiambaretto, Gurău, and Le Roy 2016; Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012) has largely ignored this potential effect. In the current study, we argue that previously found negative effects of BAs

on consumers' perceptions, such as those discovered in the context of celebrity endorsement research, could be attributed to negative PK effects. Moreover, we suggest that the impact of PK will be moderated by the number of brand allies and the level of congruence of the brand association combination.

The targeted contribution of the study is explaining the possible negative effects of brand alliance engagement using PK theory and adding to current knowledge on the impact of the number of brand allies on consumer MBA evaluation. By investigating the role of the number of allies, the study adds to the BA research stream. The focus on MBAs in the current study answers the call to expand BA research by addressing the significantly limited attention the extant literature on BA has accorded to alliances between three or more brands (Voss and Gammoh 2004; Ruth and Simonin 2003). The results support the positive moderating effect of the number of brand allies, as well as the moderating effect of the degree of congruence of brand allies' association combination. Acknowledging the existence of consumer PK poses new challenges to marketers, making them consider whether adding another brand ally will make consumers feel tricked or manipulated, and how they can mitigate this effect to achieve better post-alliance consumer responses to the focal and allied brands.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Consumer perception of BAs***

Symbolic BAs play an important role in creating sustainable competitive advantages for a firm by impacting brand evaluation and consideration (Newmeyer, Venkatesh, and Chatterjee 2014). Evaluation of the focal brand within a BA can be affected as consumers transfer associations and attitudes from one brand ally to another (Simonin and Ruth 1998). Brand alliances are often used to strengthen the attribute profile of a brand (Park, Jun, and Shocker 1996) or to establish inter-brand cross-fertilization and image enhancement (Simonin and Ruth 1998). Consideration of the focal brand represents a willingness to review the brand for

possible choice (Shocker et al. 1991). This occurs when a brand becomes accessible to consumers through a process of retrieval from memory or external cues (Newmeyer, Venkatesh, and Chatterjee 2014). Research has confirmed that exposure to a depiction or a description of a BA could serve as such a cue, and directly influence purchase intention of the focal brand (Gammoh, Voss, and Fang 2010; Samu, Krishnan, and Smith 1999; Park, Jun, and Shocker 1996).

According to signaling theory (Spence 1973), symbolic BAs are often formed when a brand does not have the necessary awareness, strength, or positioning to successfully signal a desired positive attribute on its own (Simonin and Ruth 1998; Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999). Building an alliance with another brand can help credibly highlight the desired attribute in the marketplace. The mechanism behind this assistance is also conceptualized in information integration theory (Anderson 1971): when consumers process information about a BA (e.g., advertisements depicting the alliance) or experience the product of an alliance, their attitudes toward each participating brand change. If the consumer feels strongly about the alliance information (either favorably or unfavorably), and this information is relevant to the consumer, the BA is considered to have a stronger impact on post-alliance focal brand attitudes (Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999).

The role of the number of brand allies, however, remains controversial. Despite theorized propositions of signaling theory and information integration theory regarding BA formation (Voss and Gammoh 2004; Varadarajan 1986), to this day empirical evidence of a positive impact of the number of brand allies on consumer response is present in the results of only two empirical works. In particular, a positive effect is partially depicted in an experiment conducted by Dacin and Smith (1994) on brand extensions, and the findings of Ilicic and Webster (2011), whose experiment on multiple-brand celebrity endorsement suggests that an increase in consumer purchase intent is found when the attachment to the celebrity is weak. A

surprising notion about this area of research is that most empirical studies investigating MBAs have demonstrated an insignificant impact of the number of brand partners on consumer response (e.g., Voss and Gammoh 2004; Gammoh, Voss, and Fang 2010; Erfgen, Sattler, and Villeda 2016; Dacin and Smith 1994; Mishra et al. 2017).

Moreover, celebrity endorsement research provides evidence of a negative impact of multiple-brand allies: focal brand attitudes and purchase intentions deteriorate as a celebrity endorses multiple brands (Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012; Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson 1994; Mowen and Brown 1981). The endorsement literature illustrates that consumers responding to celebrity advertising consider the endorsement portfolios of both the celebrity and the brand: under high-involvement conditions, a celebrity who endorses multiple brands hurts a brand if the celebrity fits poorly with the other brands in his or her portfolio (Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012).

Despite the literature's contradictory findings on the impact of MBAs on consumer response, understanding the mechanism behind consumers' perceptions of MBAs is crucial for effective BA portfolio design, predicting consumers' reactions to new alliance engagements, and avoiding the potential risks of expanding BA portfolios, such as brand dilution (Simonin and Ruth 1998). Disregarding this information might lead to misguided evaluations of BA engagement and the possible failure to identify the risks behind such branding activities.

### ***PK and BA perceptions***

Consumer PK is formed in response to their awareness of persuasion tactics as a result of the poorly disguised use of such tactic by the advertiser, the simultaneous exposure to a set of different marketing tactics, or repeated exposure to the same tactic, such as added pressure imposed by the salesperson's negotiation strategy, flattery from the spokesperson, excessive use of rhetorical questions, negative comparisons, covert advertising, and other tactics (Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007; Wei, Fischer, and Main 2018; Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Fransen et

al. 2015; Wojdyski and Evans 2020). As a consequence, consumers may reassess the marketer's attempts to influence them in deciding whether or not to purchase a product (Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007; Kim, Youn, and Yoon 2019) by regarding the marketer's claims as manipulative (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994).

Inferences of manipulative intent are understood as consumer implications that the marketer is attempting to persuade her/him by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means (Campbell 1995). Such a feeling can be triggered by a surprising, inconsistent, or self-serving situational cue in an attempt to understand and cope with the marketer's actions, and form valid opinions about the marketer (Friestad and Wright 1994). Consumers who suspect manipulative intent may become more cautious and look for alternate explanations concerning the persuader's agenda (DeCarlo, Laczniak, and Leigh 2013). Moreover, according to Kramer (1999), if the consumer becomes overly suspicious, it can undermine information that is substantively true, and lead to judgments that could verify initial suspicions (Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007). As a result, such consumers are likely to detach themselves from the narrative and evaluate the relevant ad more analytically (Cotte, Coulter, and Moore 2005). Studies indicate that consumers who realize a marketer is engaging in manipulative actions, such as creating fake positive product reviews, adjust their perceptions by questioning the quality of the product (Zhuang, Cui, and Peng 2018). This might also lead to negative behavioral responses, such as negative word of mouth and a desire for revenge (Joireman et al. 2013).

Taking into account the potential negative effects of consumer PK in existing studies on MBAs can help explain negative or insignificant results found by scholars instead of the expected positive spillover effects, such as brand allies' association transfer, brand attitude transfer, and perceived quality adjustments. The arousal of inferences of manipulative intent of the marketer in response to a BA cue (i.e., a description or visual description of the BA or, for example, brand associations- or fit-related elements of this representation) could be viewed



as an alternative to the well-studied mechanisms of BA spillover effects. This alternative mechanism would have an inherently negative impact on brand perception, while the latter could be positive or negative, depending on how the results of the spillover are aligned with the focal brand identity. If BA cue depiction raises an amount of PK large enough to mitigate a positive impact of BA spillover effects, this may lead to an overall decrease in the focal brand consideration.

Both processes are depicted in Figure 1, and represent the main conceptual framework of the study. Unlike the scant attention the literature has paid to the contradictory work on the number of brand alliances, mechanism A has been studied widely. Mechanism B, however, adds to the existing research stream by introducing the potential mediating role of consumer PK, triggered by BA exposure and producing a negative effect on consumer perception of the focal brand. We further focus only on mechanism B and test the proposed negative effect of consumer PK by exploring cases of brand alliances, in which the focal brand is depicted with one (BA) or two (MBA) allies.

*(Please insert Figure 1 about here)*

## **Hypotheses**

### ***Main effects***

In line with PK theory, using several brand names in a joint promotional campaign can be seen by the consumer not only as a signal of quality, but also as a persuasion tactic, which the marketer applies to convince consumers to make a purchase (Peng et al. 2016; Lunardo and Mbengue 2013; Cowley and Barron 2008; Wei, Fischer, and Main 2008). Previous research has revealed that attempts to use borrowed-interest appeals, where consumers' interest is used in an unrelated topic to trigger such interest can lead to considerable PK (e.g., celebrity endorsement (Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017), sponsorship (Campbell, Mohr, and Verlegh 2013; Boerman et al. 2018), product placement (Breves and Schramm 2019;

Naderer, Matthes, and Bintinger 2020), and cause-related marketing (Hamby and Brinberg 2018)). The inference across studies is that triggering consumer knowledge that marketing tactics are at work negatively affects the way consumers respond to embedded brands: if consumers become suspicious of an advertiser's manipulative intent, they are likely to try to resist the advertising message (Wei, Fischer, and Main 2008). Accordingly, we hypothesize that compared to a promotion depicting a single brand, consumers would likely interpret the marketers' intentions as more manipulative if a promotion also contains a brand alliance cue.

**H1:** *Compared to a single-brand promotion, consumer exposure to a promotional cue depicting brand allies leads to higher inferences of manipulative intent.*

There is evidence that inferences of manipulative intent negatively affect purchase intention (Peng et al. 2016; Campbell 1995; DeCarlo 2005). When consumers suspect an ulterior motive behind the formation of a BA, they might disengage from the purchasing process to draw additional inferences about the product, while disregarding cues relating to the product's quality (Zhuang, Cui, and Peng 2018). As a result, consumers lose confidence in the advertised products and adjust their interpretations of the alliance, resulting in lower post-alliance focal brand consideration (ibid).

Moreover, the literature has established that inferences of manipulative intent also negatively affect attitudes towards the marketer and the advertisement (Campbell 1995; Wentzel et al. 2010; Lunardo and Mbengue 2013; Cotte, Coulter, and Moore 2005). Following a high level of PK, consumers might suspect they are being manipulated, and hence will attribute less integrity to the respective marketers and evaluate the alliance advertisement less favorably (DeCarlo 2013).

Therefore, we believe that PK resulting from exposure to a BA promotional cue might affect brand consideration in two distinct ways – by constraining the formation of a positive

attitude towards the advertisement (H2) in which the BA is depicted, and by having a direct negative impact on purchase intention (H3).

**H2:** *Inferences of manipulative intent will have a negative impact on consumer attitude towards a brand alliance advertisement.*

**H3:** *Inferences of manipulative intent will have a negative impact on purchase intention for the focal brand engaged in a brand alliance.*

### ***Moderating effect of the number of brand allies***

According to signaling theory, under the condition of choosing a high-fit, high-equity, high-attitude partner, MBA formation should have a positive impact on brand choice by signaling more credibility with every BA created. Two well-known and reputable partners should offer greater backing to an unknown brand than that provided by either a single partner or in the presence of no brand ally at all (Voss and Gammoh 2004; Varadarajan 1986; Gammoh, Voss, and Fang 2010; Newmeyer, Venkatesh, and Chatterjee 2014). This position is largely explained by the results of extant research on brand extensions, which shows that the number of extensions might have a positive impact on the effectiveness of marketing strategies (Dacin and Smith 1994). However, as has been discussed before, the results of empirical testing of the assumptions underlying this position are scarce and contradictory. Therefore, an alternative explanation for the positive impact of MBAs should be provided, which would also bridge studying MBAs with the notion of PK.

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, consumers will respond to such a persuasive tactic as BA engagement by relying on either central cues (e.g., strength of the argument, brand attribute information, etc.) or peripheral cues (e.g., source attractiveness; number, not quality, of arguments; etc.) (Coulter, 2005; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). Central cues processing occurs when the receiver has both the motivation and ability to think

about the message and its topic (Samuelsen et al. 2015). Under this type of elaboration such features of a BA as congruence of brand partners or respective brand equity would be treated as arguments, i.e., information in a message that permits to evaluate the message target along the dimensions that are central for that person (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). However, if the message confuses or distracts consumers, they will instead engage in peripheral processing, i.e., evaluate the message based on other cues, such as the expertise or attractiveness of the information source or because they notice that a message has many arguments (Samuelsen et al. 2015). This processing typically occurs when a consumer is unable or unwilling to engage in much thought on the message.

Consistent with information integration theory (Anderson 1971), each time consumers receive information about a new ally of a focal brand, they have to reconnect new information with existing knowledge. As advertisements of symbolic MBAs would jointly include identifiers of at least three brands and an explanation of their joint representation, processing such visual cues must be more demanding than those of a brand alliance with one ally or a single-brand promotion. An increase in the number of allies should further limit consumers' information-processing capabilities by making them too cognitively busy (Fox, Park, and Lang 2007; Nowlis and Shiv 2005) for the central processing of BA cues to occur. Therefore, peripheral processing might take place and limit the impact of such central BA cues as brand equity, and congruence of brand associations, while augmenting the power of the mere number of cues, such as the number of allies depicted in the ad.

Cognitive load is considered to be an important factor capable of decreasing the propensity to apply PK in consumer deliberations (Wentzel, Tomczak, and Herrmann 2010). Research shows that when cognitive capacity is unconstrained, there is a higher likelihood of PK impact (Campbell and Kirmani 2008; Friedstad and Wright 1994; Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007). Low availability of cognitive resources, on the other hand, restrains an individual's

capacity to engage in analytical processing, while the application of one's PK is a process that requires a considerable number of cognitive resources (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; DeRosia 2008). This means that consumers who are cognitively busy may not be able to use their PK to the full extent in BA ad evaluation. As a result, they peripherally process the ad in a narrative manner, which results in more positive evaluations than when they are not cognitively busy (Campbell 2000). This is supported by results of research on cognitive depletion, which demonstrate the possibility of using cognitive depletion as a tactic to reduce consumers' ability to contest messages (Knowles and Linn 2004; Janssen et al. 2014).

Therefore, engaging in MBAs helps focal brand evaluation and consideration, as the depiction of an additional brand ally depletes consumers' cognitive resources weakening the impact of PK on brand attitudes and purchase intention formation.

**H4:** *A higher number of brand allies reduces the negative impact of consumers' inferences of manipulative intent on consumer attitude towards the brand alliance advertisement (a) and focal brand purchase intention (b).*

#### ***Moderating effect of congruence of brand associations combination***

The choice of congruent brand allies is considered to be one instrument companies can apply to facilitate the success of BAs. Extant research has found that congruent information is remembered better than information that is inadequate with regard to the existing scheme of knowledge because the former is more easily assimilated into an individual's existing schematic representations (Heckler and Childers 1992; Misra and Beatty 1990). As unusual product combinations can appear in BAs, it is likely some consumers will be unclear as to why the brands are featured together, which could lead to confusion about the combination of seemingly inconsistent characteristics of the brands (Park, Jun, and Shocker 1996). Researchers have shown that low congruence negatively affects the transfer of brand associations and positive brand attitude (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989; Peracchio and Tybout 1996; Simonin

and Ruth 1998) decreasing consumers' post-alliance evaluation and consideration of the brands.

Existing empirical evidence illustrates that the congruence of brand partners' association combination strongly influences the effect of MBAs on consumer response (Dacin and Smith 1994; Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012; Lunardo and Mbengue 2013). Moreover, in a study by Rice, Kelting, and Lutz (2012) the authors showed that under conditions of high ally congruence and brand involvement, the direction of the relationship between brand evaluation and the number of allies changes from negative to positive. A subsequent analysis of multiple celebrity endorsements also showcased a positive relationship. The polar change in valence of the impact of MBAs in the research of Rice, Kelting, and Lutz (2012) might suggest that the role of congruence overpowers that of the number of allies.

A higher degree of congruence may also serve as a persuasive argument, which significantly mitigates the impact of PK on consumer response (Rise et al. 2012; Kirmani and Shiv 1998) by simplifying consumer deliberations about the reasons why the marketer has decided to feature this combination of products together (Park, Jun, and Shocker 1996). PK research has found that high congruence between the appeal of the ad, its contents, and the environment in which it is depicted results in a weaker PK impact (Lunardo and Mbengue 2013; Campbell 1995). There is also evidence to that a positive estimation of the fit between brand allies indirectly leads to more positive alliance attitudes by affecting how consumers assess BA cues (Samuelsen et al. 2015).

**H5:** *High congruence of brand allies reduces the impact of inferences of manipulative intent on consumer attitude towards the brand alliance advertisement (a) and focal brand purchase intention (b).*

All in all, the effect of exposure to a BA promotional cue on consumer PK (H1) and through it on attitude towards advertisement (H2) and purchase intention (H3) can be seen as

a parallel mechanism to the well-established brand association spillover process in BA formation. Consumer PK measured as inferences of manipulative intent should have a negative impact on consumer response, which is conceptualized in this study as BA ad attitude (H2) and purchase intention (H3). At the same time, the suggested moderation effects of the number of brand allies (H4) and congruence (H5) are supposed to weaken this negative impact. Hypotheses H1-H5 are depicted in the resulting empirical model in Figure 2.

*(Please insert Figure 2 about here)*

## **Research design and method**

### ***Research design***

The study design has been based on a controlled experiment. We applied a 2 (number of allies: brand alliance of two brands vs. multiple brand alliance of three brands) x 2 (congruence of brands' association combination: high, low) between-subjects factorial design for the experiment with a control group, where the stimulus contained just the focal brand without any brand alliances. Similar to Voss and Gammoh (2004), we decided to test the impact of an alliance with one brand ally (BA) versus that of a multiple-brand alliance with two allies (MBA). There are other studies in which the impact of matching the focal brand with three and four partners is compared to that of the impact of matching it with a single ally (e.g., Gammoh, Voss, and Fang 2010; Mowen and Brown 1981); however, there is currently no empirical evidence that such impact should be any more vivid or significant than that of two partners versus three.

Participants were exposed to the experimenter's influence by being shown the stimulus – the layout of two advertisements of the focal brand, and were then asked to fill out a fully structured questionnaire. Different stimuli were used for each of the groups to assess and isolate the factors that determine consumers' perception of BA. First, the participants were randomly divided into 1 control and 4 experimental groups – 2 BA groups and 2 MBA groups (see Table

1). After the random assignment, each group was provided with a different stimulus depicting the same focal brand, but a different mix of ally brands.

To control for the possible impact of visual complexity of the ad on the perception of the stimuli in the MBA groups, the two allies were depicted with the focal brand not as three brands in one ad, but instead – in two ads, each with one different brand ally (i.e., focal brand + brand ally A, and focal brand + brand ally B). This allowed to ensure that the number of elements in each ad was the same across MBA and BA groups to avoid possible bias (Pieters, Wedel, and Zhang 2007), which might have occurred if the subjects received stimuli of different visual complexity (i.e., an ad with three depicted brands versus two). However, this also means that the participants of the MBA groups would see two ads, while the participants of the control and BA groups would see just one, depicting either the focal brand with a single ally or just the focal brand with no allies. Consequently, this might lead to a bias related to the possible impact of message repetition (Cacioppo and Petty 1985): upon seeing the focal brand twice in the two ads, MBA group participants might form stronger focal brand perception, than those in the BA groups.

Therefore, it was decided that the participants in all of the groups would be simultaneously exposed to two ads depicting the focal brand. In the two MBA groups, the participants were asked to evaluate the focal brand based on two ads, each depicting an alliance with one of two different brand partners, which were either both highly congruent (group 5) or both poorly congruent with the focal brand (group 3). Participants in the BA groups evaluated the focal brand based on two ads, each depicting an alliance with only one partner, either highly (group 4) or poorly congruent (group 2) with the focal brand. The control group participants also evaluated two ad posters, but each contained only the focal brand and no brand allies (group 1). In this group, the single brand promotion featured the same slogan, design, and most of the imagery as the experimental groups. Both of the advertisements in each group were



shown next to each other at the same time. This ensured that all experiment participants were simultaneously exposed to the same number of ads, and all the stimuli in the experimental groups possess a similar level of visual complexity.

*(Please insert Table 1 about here)*

### ***Stimuli and brand choice***

Preliminary tests were conducted to verify the research structure. First, product categories were distinguished, in which the products were considered as items in daily demand and partially planned purchases. With such purchases consumers know what goods they need, but have not formed a sustained preference in relation to any brand (Cook, Campbell, and Shadish 2002). Then, to exclude products which were not differentiated within a subcategory or for which involvement in the purchase was too low, we conducted unstructured interviews ( $n = 39$ ) with respondents, similar in characteristics to those who would subsequently meet the selection criteria formulated for the main study. Lastly, an analysis of print and online advertising of product subcategories allowed us to distinguish subcategories exhibited more often in joint promotions. This resulted in the choice of soap as a subcategory for the brand stimuli.

The criteria of simplicity, ambiguity of country of origin, and lack of specific associations were used in creating the identifiers of the focal brand and the campaign message. The brand name and slogan were designed not to trigger a strong association with the price or quality of the product. As a result, “White Soap” was chosen for the brand name, and the accompanying slogan read: “Pure perfection.” The aim of the advertising message was to explain the joint brand representation while being suitable for all groups, including the control group. As a result, the following message was chosen: “the choice of a real expert!” In the control group, the posters depicted only the product, and did not provide information about BAs.

Ally brands were selected after a series of preliminary tests. Online interviews ( $n = 23$ ) were conducted to determine the fit of each product subcategory for a BA with soap. The respondents were required to assess the suitability of a particular product subcategory, using a five-point scale, from “completely unfit” to “excellent fit.” In the next step, the respondents were asked to recall at least three brands from each product subcategory, and indicate their attitude towards them using a scale from Dickinson and Barker (2007). To ensure comparable brand equities of the potential brand partners, the shortlist of brands included the most recognizable brands, for which the pre-test respondents indicated a similarly high level of attitudes. Then, the final set of brands was selected with the help of two focus groups ( $n = 8$ ,  $n = 7$ ). The participants of the first focus group were asked to assess the congruence of 34 different brands with the focal brand for a potential joint promotion. The congruence between the brands was measured with a scale of one question adopted from research of conceptual coherence for brand extensions (Dawar and Anderson 1994; Murphy and Medin, 1985): “How much sense does an advertising campaign between White Soap and (a partner brand) make? (1 – makes no sense, 5 – makes obvious sense).” This assessment was followed by a discussion of the responses as focus group participants were asked to reveal the reasons why they gave a particular brand congruence assessment. As a result, Lancôme hand cream and Splat toothpaste were chosen as high-congruence partner brands for White Soap, whereas Nokia mobile phone and Perrier mineral water were used as low-congruence partners. Following the results of the first focus group discussion, mockups of brand alliance promotions were designed and assessed in the second focus group to ensure the recognition of brand identifiers, congruence, and general believability of the stimuli.

The finale research design included five groups, including one control group, and four experimental groups (see Table 1). Lancôme was featured in two of the experimental groups (BA and MBA high-congruence groups) as well as Perrier (BA and MBA low-congruence

groups), while Nokia and Splat only appeared in the respective MBA groups (see Appendix A).

### ***Sample description and procedures***

The sample for the experiment amounted to 334 subjects (see Appendix B), who were contacted via an online consumer panel. They were asked to undergo the experiment on a computer in an online format. The criteria for participation were set on the basis of whether the participant had bought soap over 60 days prior to taking part in the experiment, and whether the participant was the one in the household who decided on the choice of this product category. Filtering questions preceding the main questionnaire led to the exclusion of 29 respondents for not meeting the criteria for eligibility in the research.

The participants who advanced to the experimental part of the survey were randomly divided into the control and experimental groups, after which they were asked to study the posters and fill out a questionnaire. The experiment took about 20 minutes, and each questionnaire averaged 70 questions, including filtering questions and questions recording demographic characteristics. To encourage careful reading of the advertising message in all of the groups, the participants were asked to come up with promotion conditions for the depicted ads. In the rest of the questionnaire, either a five-point Likert scale or response options were used. Of the number of questionnaires filled in, five were eliminated because of partial completion, resulting in a final sample of 300 respondents.

### ***Measures***

Scales from previous research were used mainly to measure all the constructs within the model. For the measures of attitude towards the ad (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ) and focal brand attitude (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .9$ ) the scales were modified from a bi-polar semantic differential (Mitchell and Olson 1981) to the 5-point Likert scale in order to avoid increased cognitive demand, hence introducing new errors in scores (Friborg, Martinussen, and Rosenvinge 2006). Before the data

collection process, a back-translation from English to Russian and pre-tests for the scales were conducted on a small sample following a methodology consistent with Brislin (1970). Descriptive statistics, AVEs, and correlation coefficients are indicated in Table 2, while Appendix C shows detailed items information, as well as reliability and the validity measures for each construct (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

*(Please insert Table 2 about here)*

Both purchase intention and attitude towards the advertising were measured according to the extent to which the respondents agreed to a set of statements using a five-point scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). Purchase intention was measured using a three-item scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ) adopted from Putrevu and Lord (1994), and attitude towards the advertising depicting the BA was measured using a five-item scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ) adopted from Mitchell and Olson (1981).

The measure for inferences of manipulative intent ( $\alpha = .8$ ) was adopted from Campbell (1995). The congruence of allied brands was first assessed in the pre-tests using a measure from Dawar and Anderson (1994), which is reflected in the choice of partners for the experimental groups. For manipulation check purposes, in the experimental groups, we asked the participants to indicate the congruence between the focal brand and the depicted brand allies using a scale adopted from Fleck and Quester (2007). The scale consisted of measures of expectancy and relevancy of brand association combination ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $CR = .86$ ,  $AVE = .51$ ). The subjects of the experimental groups with the predefined low-congruence stimuli showcased an overall evaluation of congruence ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = .96$ ), which was significantly lower,  $t(239) = 2.3$ ,  $p = .0009$ , than in the predefined high-congruence stimuli groups ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = .53$ ).

The control variables used in the study include involvement in the product category (Yoo and Donthu 2001), focal brand attitude, and pre-alliance attitude towards the brand allies.

Although in experimental research, other variables are often not controlled for because of randomization, the practice is considered appropriate if there is an interest in knowing whether the relevant independent variable is capable of incrementing variance accounted for in the overall model beyond that offered by other already recognized variables (Carlson and Wu 2012). We measured involvement in product consumption (Yoo and Donthu 2001) ( $\alpha = .9$ ), as there is evidence it might have an effect on focal brand evaluation (Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012). The scale ( $\alpha = .81$ ) was adopted from Yoo and Donthu (2001). Focal brand attitude was measured by a scale adopted from Mitchell and Olson (1981) ( $\alpha = .9$ ). Pre-alliance attitude towards the brand allies was measured as the aggregate of the attitudes of all the presented brand allies in the stimuli of the experimental groups. To assess each brand attitude, we used a one-item scale, which is considered sufficient for such purposes (Rossiter, 2002), and ensures comparability of the amount of survey questions across experimental groups with a different number of brands.

### ***Reliability and validity tests***

We based the analysis of the constructs for reliability and validity on suggestions from Gerbing and Anderson (1988). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to test all of the constructs for unidimensionality. During CFA composite reliability, the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs were checked, and the initial measurement scales were refined. Multiple iterations of CFA were run to purify the measurement scales and optimize the model fit. This resulted in the deletion of three items: two from manipulative intent, and one from involvement in the product category. The item loadings for the abovementioned items were below the accepted value of 0.6. These items were, in fact, those of the few reverse questions in the midst of a series of direct questions. It is possible to assume that some of the respondents did not notice the opposite connotation of the questions, which explains the problematic estimation results. The composite reliability of all constructs after purification was

greater than .75, which is above the recommended threshold. Convergent validity was ensured by using the following criteria: average variance extracted (AVE) > .5, scale composite reliability (CR) > .7, and the item factor loadings > .6 (Bagozzi and Yi 2012). For all the constructs the Fornell-Larcker (Fornell and Larcker 1981) criterion has been met, thus ensuring discriminant validity between the constructs of the conceptual model. For further hypotheses-testing procedures, the control variables were transformed into item parcels based on the previous results of the unidimensionality tests (Bandalos and Finney 2001). The descriptive statistics and correlations between the constructs of the study are presented in Appendix B. Overall CFA resulted in the following model fit:  $X^2/df = 1.897$  ( $p < 0.001$ ),  $TLI = .928$ ,  $CFI = .947$ ,  $RMSEA = .062$  ( $pclose = .114$ ).

## **Data analysis and results**

### *Analytical procedure*

The study hypotheses were tested in several steps. Firstly, the groups of consumers exposed to a promotion, which depicted any number of brand allies ( $n = 240$ , groups 2-5) and those from the control group who were not exposed to any brand allies ( $n = 60$ , group 1) were compared for the difference in the value of PK, which is conceptualized as inferences of manipulative intent. Additional tests were conducted to verify the difference in consumer PK between the cases of BA with one brand ally ( $n = 120$ , groups 2 and 4) and MBA with two brand allies, i.e., MBA ( $n = 120$ , groups 3 and 5) (H1).

Secondly, in order to proceed with H2-3, the main model (Model 1) was estimated using the SEM procedure to assess the effect of inferences of manipulative intent on consumer perception of BA, including the attitude to advertising using joint brand representation and focal brand purchase intention. Model 1 has demonstrated good fit with  $X^2/df = 1.29$  ( $p = .054$ ),  $CFI = .984$ ,  $TLI = .976$ ,  $RMSEA = .036$  ( $pclose = 0.87$ ).

Finally, the moderation was tested using multiple group analysis (Models 2 and 3 for the number of brand allies and the level of congruence accordingly), whereas the invariance tests were applied to ensure configural and metric invariance of a multiple group solution. Model 2 resulted in the following fit:  $X^2/df = 1.368$  ( $p = .029$ ),  $CFI = .981$ ,  $TLI = .972$ ,  $RMSEA = .04$  ( $pclose = .77$ ). Model 3 demonstrated the following fit:  $X^2/df = 1.5$  ( $p = 0.006$ ),  $CFI = .973$ ,  $TLI = .962$ ,  $RMSEA = .046$  ( $pclose = .619$ ).

### ***Main findings***

#### *Testing the impact of brand alliance exposure on persuasion knowledge*

A mean-comparison test was conducted to determine if there were significant differences for the groups that were exposed to stimuli with BA ( $n = 240$ , groups 2-5) and those that were not ( $n = 60$ , group 1). To check for normal distribution, the variables in both groups were tested for kurtosis and skewness: customer advocacy and purchase intention showcased significant kurtosis (-1.6 and -1.8, respectively) disproving the assumption of normal distribution (George and Mallery 2010). Consequently, non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for comparing the two variables, while ANOVA was used for comparing PK across groups. The results (see Table 3) reveal statistically significant difference between the groups for PK ( $p < 0.001$ ): exposure to a BA was accompanied by a higher level of consumer PK. Further analysis has shown a significant difference in PK ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the BA groups with a different number of allies: a higher number of allies was associated with smaller PK. Post-hoc test results confirmed the possibility of rejecting the null hypothesis at the significant levels reported in Table 3.

*(Please insert Table 3 about here)*

The abovementioned results can be interpreted to indicate a direct effect of the number of allies on PK formation. To further explore this assumption, as part of a post hoc analysis, the same method was used to look for differences between the control group (no BA) ( $n = 60$ )

and MBA ( $n = 120$ ) groups. The analysis revealed that while there is a significant difference in inferences of manipulative intent between the control group and the whole BA/MBA sample, BA formation has unequal effect on inferences of manipulative intent – the effect is robust for the case of a one-ally brand alliance. These results demonstrate that while BA exposure is accompanied by higher PK in comparison to a single-brand promotion, multiple brand alliance engagement does not aid in further increase of PK.

#### *Testing the main effects*

The results of testing the main effects for Model 1 (see Table 4) demonstrate a negative impact of the inference of manipulative intent on both advertisement attitude (H2) and focal brand purchase intention (H3). All the control variables have a positive impact on purchase intention, including focal brand attitude, involvement in the product category, and attitude toward partner brands. This combination of effects explains focal brand purchase intention ( $R^2 = 49\%$ ) and advertising attitude ( $R^2 = 20\%$ ).

*(Please insert Table 4 about here)*

#### *Testing the moderation effect of the number of brand allies*

The moderation effect of the number of brand allies was tested in Model 2 (H4). A comparison of the group effects demonstrates substantial differences in the results, highlighting that the role of PK differs among the groups. The negative effect of the inference of manipulative intent on ad attitude holds for the group with a lower number of brand allies. The effect of PK on purchase intention is stronger for the group with a higher number of brand allies, whereas this effect is also negative. The positive link between ad attitude and purchase intention holds only for the group with the lower number of brand allies. The effect of controls also changes: product category involvement and focal brand attitude have only a significant impact on purchase intention for the group with a lower number of brand allies, while ad attitude is affected only in the group with a higher number of allies. These disparities result in the difference in the



variances explained for the dependent constructs: the model more strongly explains both ad attitude and purchase intention in the group with a lower number of brand allies ( $R^2 = 40\%$  vs.  $R^2 = 19\%$  and  $R^2 = 67\%$  vs.  $R^2 = 34\%$ , accordingly).

As the model contains the chain of effects related to the consumer decision process – e.g., ad attitude that precedes and affects purchase intention, there is an opportunity to investigate the indirect effects as post-hoc analysis. The role of ad attitude thus becomes a potential mediator for the PK-purchase intention effect. As indicated by Table 4, there are significant indirect effects in Model 1 and Model 2 (the group with the lower number of brand allies), demonstrating that ad attitude mediates the effect of the inference of manipulative intent on purchase intention. This finding is consistent with the work of MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986), in which the mediating role of attitude towards the ad on brand choice was established.

#### *Testing the moderation effect of congruence of brand association combination*

According to Model 3 (H5), under conditions of low congruence, PK has a stronger negative impact on both purchase intention and ad attitudes (see Table 4), while the absolute value of purchase intention is also the lowest in the low-congruence groups. The effect of controls also changes according to the congruence level: product category involvement and pre-alliance attitudes towards brand allies have only a significant impact for the group with a higher congruence of BAs, while the significant effect of focal brand attitude holds only for the group with less congruent allies.

Finally, a post hoc analysis was conducted, whereas we tested a combination of both proposed moderators, which revealed differences among the smaller subsamples ( $n = 60$ ) (see Figure 3). The results indicate evidence of an unhypothesized two-way interaction effect: the combination of a lower number of allies and low congruence showed the highest level of PK. The best outcomes for the marketer are exhibited by the combination of a higher number of brand allies and higher congruence. The Kruskal-Wallis H tests (see Table 5), which were

followed by Dunn's Pairwise Comparison tests, revealed significant differences in the level of inferences of manipulative intent and purchase intention between congruence groups for the BA condition ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and in the level of inferences of manipulative intent for the MBA condition ( $p < 0.001$ ).

*(Please insert Figure 3 about here)*

*(Please insert Table 5 about here)*

## **Discussion and implications**

The current study aimed to contribute to the BA field by exploring an alternative mechanism, explaining existing contradictory evidence on the BA effect on consumer perceptions. The analysis of the impact of BA formation on persuasion knowledge and the role of MBAs in these processes is currently absent from the BA literature, even though this corresponds with the future research direction suggested by Simonin and Ruth in their seminal work: "Further research also should examine other possible moderators, such as repetition of exposure to the alliance and product knowledge, which have been shown to be important to consumer persuasion" (Simonin and Ruth 1988, 40) reflecting concern that "brand alliances are not without complexities and potential negative effects" (Simonin and Ruth 1988, 30). The results of the empirical study have confirmed the negative effect of consumer PK on both BA advertisement attitude and focal brand purchase intention. As many companies are already engaged in MBAs, understanding this mechanism can explain the observed returns of their implementation, which could be invaluable to marketing practitioners.

### ***Impact of BA engagement on PK***

Based on the comparison between a single-brand promotion, the BA and MBA conditions, it is possible to infer that BA formation evokes more PK than single-brand promotion. This suggests that exposure to a BA promotion in general would increase expressed inference of

manipulative intent with regard to the marketer's motives. However, the fact that the group analysis did not reveal significant differences in PK between the control and MBA groups suggests that BAs' impact on PK is not always straightforward, and may be different for cases of multiple allies. Regardless of the experimental group, the PK resulting from exposure to a BA cue negatively affected focal brand purchase intention (H3). Therefore, it is possible to state that consumers may perceive BA as a tactic marketers employ for persuasive purposes, and use this knowledge to adjust and eventually to decrease brand evaluation and consideration.

#### ***The moderating role of the number of brand allies***

Forming a one-ally BA demonstrates a positive link between BA ad attitude and purchase intention, which is reinforced by the degree of involvement in the product category and attitudes towards the focal and partner brands, which corresponds to the assumptions of BA researchers (Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012). However, due to PK counterbalancing the positive effect of a firm's marketing efforts, this positive result does not suggest an increase in the marginal effect of introducing a brand ally into the focal brand's promotion. Consumers perceive the use of a brand ally in promotion as a persuasive tactic, and in an attempt to cope with this knowledge it is likely they use central processing and recall information and attitudes they possess towards the partner brand. Moreover, according to the findings, consumers in our study also took the opportunity of applying their attitude towards the fictional focal brand to help them determine the correct response to the ad.

Compared to a BA condition (one brand ally), exposure to an MBA cue has comparatively weakened the impact of PK, which resulted in the establishment of a relatively more favorable post-alliance purchase intention, which supports H4. It is possible that this is connected to the fact that in the MBA condition PK was not triggered to a meaningful extent (see Table 3): in comparison to the no alliance condition PK significantly increased only for BA and not for MBA, which might be connected to the strength of PK impact on purchase

intention. Another possible explanation for this result is that the exposure to three brands (MBA with a focal brand and two allies) pulled attention away from the process of purposeful deliberation about the value and tactics behind the use of two brand allies as this process became too draining on their cognitive resources. It could be inferred that the respondents used peripheral processing to assess the BA cues and consequently did not apply much effort in connecting information about the ally brands. As a result, they seemingly abstained from accessing much existing knowledge about the involved brands or forming meaningful opinions about the focal brand in a way that might have led to more manipulation inferences.

*(Please insert Figure 4 about here)*

Model 2 reveals that the process by which BA formation affects focal brand purchase intention through PK is different for MBAs. In the latter case (see Figure 4c), purchase intention experiences a direct negative effect from inferences of manipulative intent, while for one-ally alliances the impact is indirect (see Figure 4b). We attribute these effects to different conditions of PK: as shown previously, the two-allies MBA group represents a low PK impact condition, while the one-ally BA group demonstrates a higher PK impact condition. It is possible to suggest that in the low PK impact condition, consumers were likely to be too cognitively busy to connect their slight disdain with the marketer's attempt to persuade them into buying the product with their attitude towards the ad in which the product was depicted. If this was the case, it is possible that the positive process of association, quality attribution, and attitude transfer were not overwhelmed by the impact of PK, finally leading to an insignificant increase in purchase intention. In the high PK impact condition, consumers used PK to modify their attitudes, resulting in a significant drop of purchase intention.

These assumptions are consistent with the classical work by Shimp (1981), where the impact of ad attitudes on purchase intention is discussed. It is argued that due to distraction or low involvement, the consumer may end up not forming any semantic memory of the brand

information depicted in the ad, which thus leads to an insignificant impact on purchase intention. This corresponds to the assumption that excessive information about many brand allies distracts consumers from drawing attitude-related cues that could have influenced purchase intention. That is also reflected in Table 4, where it is shown that the impact of product category involvement on purchase intention is significantly weaker in the multiple-brand ally conditions.

### ***Role of congruence of brand association combination***

In accordance with existing studies on multiple-brand celebrity endorsements (Erfgen, Sattler, and Villeda 2016; Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012) and PK (Lunardo and Mbengue 2013; Campbell 1995), the congruence of brand association combination also moderates the impact of PK on focal brand purchase intention. Consumer exposure to a BA promotional cue with high congruence of allies' brand association combination showcased a positive impact on diminishing the potential negative effects of consumer PK. It could be inferred from the results that those consumers who did not have to engage in the process of matching poorly congruent brand associations also did not turn to their assumptions about the manufacturers' intentions, but instead used the opportunity to recall positive pre-alliance partner brand associations leading to an overall more favorable evaluation of the alliance. Supporting the assumption that congruence and number of allies are separate but complementary moderators is the fact that under the low-congruence condition, when PK was highest in the sample, distracting the consumer with the inclusion of two more brand allies instead of one, made more difference than in the other groups by significantly improving both purchase intention and ad attitude.

### ***Limitations and future research***

Firstly, a limitation of the current study is that it addresses joint advertising, which is just one type of BA. Although joint advertising is a typical element for most types of BAs (Newmeyer, Venkatesh, and Chatterjee 2014), the generalization of these findings to other types of physical

and symbolic alliances requires further investigation. In particular, the peculiarities of celebrity endorsement as a type of BA (Seno and Lucas 2007; Ilicic and Webster 2013) must be acknowledged in order to successfully apply the results of this study to that context. We realize that in comparing the research streams of BAs and celebrity endorsement, we ultimately treated personal brands as product brands, assuming common goals and risks, which restricted the generalizability of the findings for that research area.

Next, similar to Voss and Gammoh (2004), we chose to suggest conditions of brand alliance with one versus two brand allies (not three or four), which creates a possible confound in our manipulation. Although our conceptual model suggests that a further increase in brand allies should follow the same results (i.e., gradually decreasing the impact of PK), this might require further testing to determine whether this strategy might have diminishing returns or a saturation point. As the number of allies grows, the effectiveness of a BA may weaken as a result of repeated exposure to the focal brand depiction in the stimulus (Cacioppo and Petty 1985), especially if each new BA ad will be presented in varying contexts (Schumann, Petty, and Clemons 1990), which limits the ability of consumers to recognize it is an MBA.

Another limitation of this study is that the current research has used a fictitious focal brand, and thus it is unclear how the established effects would apply to real brands. Studies on alliances involving a fictitious brand partnering with an established brand have also been conducted in prior BA research (Gammoh et al. 2010; Rao and Ruekert 1994; Voss and Gammoh 2004), in which it was acknowledged that the established findings should be similar to effects found with new brands. The choice of a fictitious brand for the focal brand was made to avoid the effect of prior focal brand attitudes on alliance evaluation, while the choice of real brands for partner brands allowed for the spillover of brand attitudes – one of the main strategic reasonings behind brand alliance formation. However, the implications of this research for brands, which are established and possess high pre-alliance brand equity, are less understood.

Moreover, we have only analyzed the impact of MBAs on the focal brand, and have not compared post-alliance evaluations of the partner brands with pre-alliance conditions. Future research should also consider the impact of PK and MBA formation on the evaluation of brand allies, not just the focal brand.

The peculiarities of the chosen research design also prohibit a proper testing of a two-way interaction of congruence on the different stages of the BA evaluation process. Although our data suggest that the moderator decreases PK and weakens its impact, the first effect is analyzed as an experiment, while the second effect is measured using the SEM procedure and takes place later in the model, after the creation of PK. We therefore encourage further testing of the proposed conceptual model for this research using designs, where, for example, PK could be measured at several stages of the model. Also, such designs should allow for an assessment of the cognitive load of respondents as they are exposed to BA stimuli, which would bring more empirical substance to the explanation of multiple allies' effects given in this study.

Finally, although our research proposes notions about the influence of the number of brand allies, the research design focuses merely on the formation of simultaneous brand allies. In practice, a time gap might exist between exposure to related BA cues. Although joint promotion with several independent partners might co-exist at the same time, they are often gradually introduced to consumers within periods of weeks, months, and even years. We suggest future studies should investigate the effect of the time lag between the introduction of additional brand allies on consumers' perceptions of BAs.

### ***Implications for theory***

Contrary to our study, the results of research on celebrity endorsements indicate a strong negative impact of multiple partners on alliance evaluation. We expect that this influence might instead be attributed to a high impact of PK, which has been amplified by factors connected to research design.

First, it is necessary to mention studies that primarily used descriptions of promotional campaigns for stimuli rather than visualization (e.g., Mowen and Brown 1981; Gammoh, Voss, and Fang 2010). In these cases, the increase in the number of allies in the experimental treatment might have led to further accumulation of explicit information on marketer tactics, which the literature has established as the main source of PK. For example, the stimuli used by Mowen and Brown (1981) included extensive disclosure information about budgeting, distribution, and the background of the promotion, which became even more comprehensive as the number of allies increased. The idea that this might have increased PK is also supported by the high degree of suspicion of the endorser's mercantile motivations, which was expressed by respondents in two out of three experimental groups (Mowen and Brown 1981, 439).

In the research by Rice, Kelting, and Lutz (2012) the number of ad exposures in the MBA condition was higher than in the control group, which allows for at least a partial attribution of the alleged negative impact of multiple brand allies to message repetition. Although studies in general have found that repeated exposure to a stimulus ("mere exposure") is associated with increased liking for that stimulus (Zajonc 1968; Pechmann and Stewart 1988), its effectiveness may diminish with increasing exposure (Cacioppo and Petty 1985; Calder and Sternthal 1980), especially if the stimulus occurs in varying ad contexts (Schumann, Petty, and Clemons 1990). As Bornstein, Kale, and Cornell (1990) demonstrated, boredom effects in mere exposure experiments occur primarily at higher exposure frequencies, and can be responsible for weakening the mere exposure effect (Zajonc 1968), which would take the form of a U-shaped frequency-liking curve (Bornstein and D'agostino 1992). According to Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson (1994), repetition effects may disguise or enhance any multiple product endorsement effects on attitude towards the ad and purchase intention. We extend this proposition by presuming that repeated exposure to the same marketer tactics may also elicit



PK, which would negatively affect consumer response by potentially mitigating all positive effects MBA engagement might have had on the brand.

In a study by Rice, Kelting, and Lutz (2012), the authors showed that under the condition of high partner congruence and brand involvement, the direction of the relationship between brand evaluation and the number of partners changes and becomes positive. A subsequent analysis of multiple-celebrity endorsements also showcased a positive relationship. Similarly, in the work of Ilicic and Webster (2011) under the condition of high brand image fit, the valence of the relationship between MBAs and brand consideration changed depending on the degree of brand involvement. In accordance with existing research (e.g., Campbell 1995; Lunardo and Mbengue 2013) it is possible to view the vast differences in congruence and consumption involvement as counterforces to PK, which may overpower the moderating effect of the number of allies. Our results support the fact that congruence acts as a powerful moderator in the discussed relationships, and therefore must be controlled for.

Therefore, we suggest that the discrepancies in the results of authors studying MBAs may come from neglecting to measure the impact of consumer PK elicited by BA exposure. In cases where a negative impact in consumer response has been found, the impact of PK has likely overshadowed the positive effect of engaging in an alliance with several brand partners due to an increase in exposure of a marketer's tactics, message repetition, or conditions of low congruence and involvement. Hence, we propose that to explain the mechanism behind consumers' perceptions of MBAs, external factors that might elicit or strengthen the impact of PK must be controlled.

### ***Managerial implications***

If a marketer is considering simultaneous engagement in yet another BA with an already ongoing alliance with another brand, be it a celebrity or product brand, the marketer is likely to wonder whether there could, in fact, be too many BAs. This study's findings offer these

specialists an opportunity to widen their perspective on managing BAs as we help to answer an important question: Can the advantages of having different brands simultaneously depicted with a product offset the cost of such an approach? Our results show that compared to a BA with one brand ally, two-allies MBAs don't have a negative effect on brand consideration, and under conditions of low PK impact can improve overall alliance evaluation.

The findings also confirm the importance of conducting preliminary studies of the effects of PK for decision-making with regard to BA formation. It is important to be aware of the already existing PK elicited for different consumer segments of a firm in response to current brand promotion to be able to understand whether the strengthening of PK will overturn the positive impact of BA engagement. It is essential to learn to manage consumer PK by carefully choosing potential brand allies. The empirical results show that choosing highly congruent partners can offset the negative impact of BAs on brand consideration. Both the number of brand allies and the congruence of brand partner association combination should hence be considered as important tools that counterbalance and mitigate the potential negative effects of consumer PK.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Figure A.1. Group 1 stimuli: control group, focal brand with no brand allies



Figure A.2. Group 2 stimuli: focal brand with one low congruence brand ally groups stimuli



Figure A.3. Group 3 stimuli: focal brand with two low congruence brand allies groups stimuli



Figure A.4. Group 4 stimuli: focal brand with one high congruence brand ally groups stimuli



Figure A.5. Group 5 stimuli: focal brand with two high congruence brand allies groups stimuli



## Appendix B

Table B.1. Sample description

<b>Socio-demographic characteristics</b>		<b>Share, %</b>
Gender	Male	31%
	Female	69%
Age (years)	24-26	18%
	27-28	27%
	29-31	30%
	32-38	25%
Income level	We have enough money for food and clothes, but it will be difficult for us to buy a TV, a refrigerator, or a washing machine	22%
	We can buy basic household appliances, but cannot afford to buy a car	57%
	We have enough money for everything, except for such expensive acquisitions as an apartment or a country house	21%
	We have no financial difficulties. If necessary, we can buy an apartment or a house	1%
Education	Incomplete high school	5%
	High school	14%
	Incomplete college/university	9%
	College/University	72%

## Appendix C

Table C.1. Measurement items overview, standardized factor loadings, reliability and validity measures

Construct/ items	St. factor loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
<b>Purchase intention</b> (Putrevu and Lord 1994)				
It is very likely that I will switch to White Soap.	.83			
I'll buy White Soap the next time I need soap.	.89	.88	.87	.7
I plan to try White Soap.	.76			
<b>Attitude towards the ad</b> (Mitchell and Olson 1981)				
This advertising is interesting.	.85			
This advertising is good.	.9			
This advertising likable.	.86	.93	.93	.74
This advertisement is not irritating.	.75			
This advertising is pleasant.	.92			
<b>Focal brand attitude</b> (Mitchell and Olson 1981)				
White Soap — is a good brand.	.84			
White Soap — is a likable brand.	.79			
White Soap — is a pleasant brand.	.81	.9	.9	.65
White Soap — is a positive brand.	.81			
White Soap — is a high-quality brand.	.76			
<b>Inference of manipulative intent</b> (Campbell 1995)				
The way this ad tries to persuade people seems acceptable to me. **	*			
The advertiser tried to manipulate the audience in ways that I don't like.	.67			
I was annoyed by this ad because the advertiser seemed to be trying to inappropriately manage or control the consumer audience.	.67	.8	.8	.5
I didn't mind this ad: the advertiser tried to be persuasive without being excessively manipulative. **	*			
This ad was fair in what was said and shown. **	.77			
I think that this advertisement is fair. **	.8			
<b>Involvement in the product category</b> (Yoo and Donthu 2001)				
I am very involved with the purchase of soap.	.78			
I buy soap very often.	.57			
I am a soap expert.	.73	.8	.75	.5
I'm not interested in soap. **	*			

Notes: \* – items were deleted during the CFA stage. \*\* – reversed questions.



## Tables

Table 1. Experiment design description

Group #	1	2	3	4	5
Description	Control group (focal brand)	Focal brand and 1 low congruence ally	Focal brand and 2 low congruence allies	Focal brand and 1 high congruence ally	Focal brand and 2 high congruence allies
Focal brand	White Soap	White Soap	White Soap	White Soap	White Soap
First brand ally	–	Perrier mineral water	Perrier mineral water	Lancôme cream	Lancôme cream
Second brand ally	–	–	Nokia smart phone	–	Splat tooth paste
# of simultaneously depicted ad mockups	2	2	2	2	2
Gender ratio (women/ men)	41/19	40/20	41/19	43/17	42/18
Average age	28.4	29.1	30.1	29.3	30

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, AVE and squared correlation coefficients

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Inference of manipulative intent	2.49	.971	<b>.5</b>	.06	.207	.063	.026	0.03
2. Attitude towards the ad	3.07	1.14	-.257	<b>.74</b>	.119	.004	.004	0.000
3. Purchase intention	3.17	1.21	-.45***	.346**	<b>.7</b>	.091	.071	0.024
4. Focal brand attitude	3.08	.85	-.252**	.068	.303***	<b>.65</b>	.000	0.006
5. Involvement with the product category	3.21	.96	-.164*	.068	.267**	-.028	<b>.5</b>	0.023
6. Pre-alliance brand allies' attitude	3.55	1.22	.189*	-.083	.079	-.026	.154	n.a.

**Note:** *p*-values: \* -  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* -  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* -  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and group mean comparison tests results for groups

	No BA	BA and MBA	p-value	BA	MBA	p-value	No BA	MBA	p-value
IMI	2.1	2.5	***	2.6	2.38	*	2.1	2.38	<i>n.s.</i>
AD	3.77	3.07	***	3.08	3.07	<i>n.s.</i>	3.77	3.07	***
PI	3.28	3.17	<i>n.s.</i>	3.03	3.31	*	3.28	3.31	<i>n.s.</i>

**Note:**

*No BA – control group (no brand alliance), BA – groups 2 and 4 (focal brand and 1 brand ally), MBA – groups 3,5 (focal brand and 2 brand allies), BA and MBA – groups 2,3,4,5.*

*p-values: \* –  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* –  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* –  $p < 0.001$ .*

*IMI – inferences of manipulative intent, AD – attitude towards the ad, PI – purchase intention.*

Table 4. Results of testing the alternative models

<i>Path coefficients</i>	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>		<b>Model 3</b>	
		Focal brand and 1 brand ally	Focal brand and 2 brand allies	Low congruence	High congruence
<i>Direct effects</i>					
IMI → AD	-.92***	-1.08***	-.58	-1.1***	-.5
IMI → PI	-.65**	-.16	-.73*	-.59*	-.45
AD → PI	.22**	.45***	.11	.23*	.34**
<i>Indirect effects</i>					
IMI → PI	-.20**	-.49**	-.06	-.25*	-.17
<i>Total effects</i>					
IMI → PI	-.86***	-.65**	-.8*	-.85***	-.62*
<i>Controls</i>					
FBA → AD	-.18	-.01	-.3*	-.41**	.12
INV → AD	-.03	.16	-.2*	-.005	-.08
PABPA → AD	-.01	-.003	-.08	-.02	-.24**
FBA → PI	.23*	.3***	.21	.37**	.02
INV → PI	.15*	.19**	.1	.15	.22*
PABPA → PI	.16**	.11*	.2*	.12	.18*
<i>R-Squared statistic</i>					
AD	20%	40%	19%	33%	9%
PI	49%	67%	34%	62%	30%

*Notes:*

a) *p-values:* \* -  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* -  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* -  $p < 0.001$ . IMI – inferences of manipulative intent, AD – attitude towards the ad, PI – purchase intention, FBA – focal brand attitude, INV – involvement with the product category, PABPA – pre-alliance brand allies attitude.

b) *Goodness of fit for the models:*

*Model 1:*  $X^2/df = 1.29 (.054)$ , CFI = .984, TLI = .976, RMSEA = .036 (*pclose* = .87);

*Model 2:*  $X^2/df = 1.368 (.029)$ , CFI = .981, TLI = .972, RMSEA = .04 (*pclose* = .77);

*Model 3:*  $X^2/df = 1.5 (.006)$ , CFI = .973, TLI = .962, RMSEA = .046 (*pclose* = .619).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and group comparison tests results for combination of moderators

	Group: Focal brand and 1 brand ally				Group: 2 Focal brand and two brand allies			
	High congruence	Low congruence	Kruskal -Wallis p-value	Dunn's test p-value	High congruence	Low congruence	Kruskal -Wallis p-value	Dunn's test p-value
IMI	2.3	2.94	***	***	2.13	2.63	**	***
AD	3.19	2.97	n.s	n.s.	2.75	3.4	***	***
PI	3.26	2.81	n.s	*	3.42	3.2	n.s	n.s.

**Note:** *p-values: \* -  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* -  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* -  $p < 0.001$ . IMI – inferences of manipulative intent, AD – attitude towards the ad, PI – purchase intention.*

**Figures**

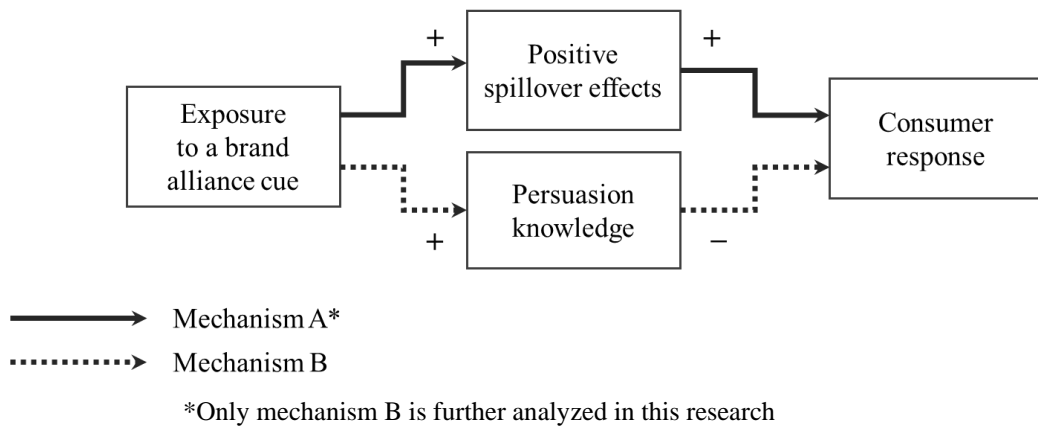
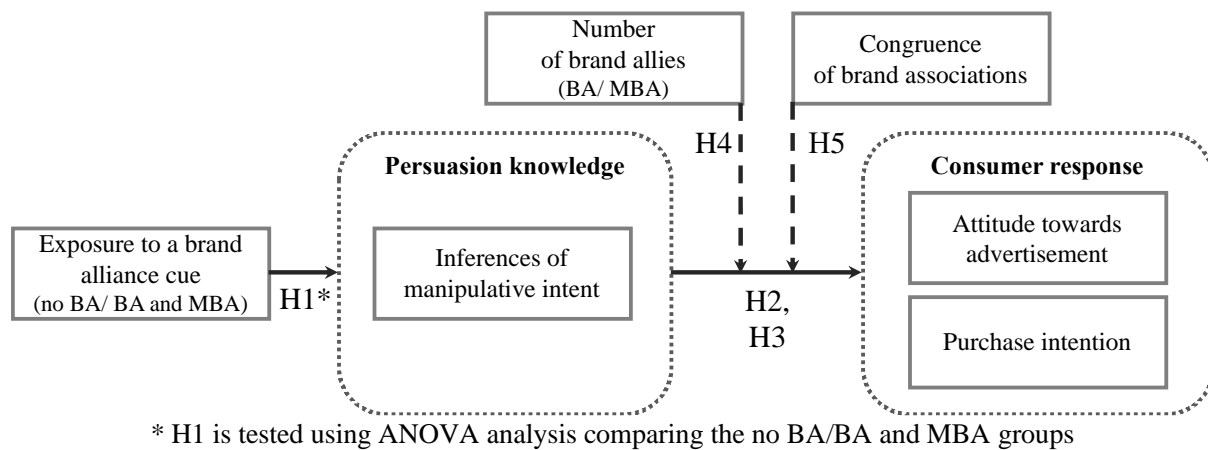


Figure 1. Role of exposure to a brand alliance cue

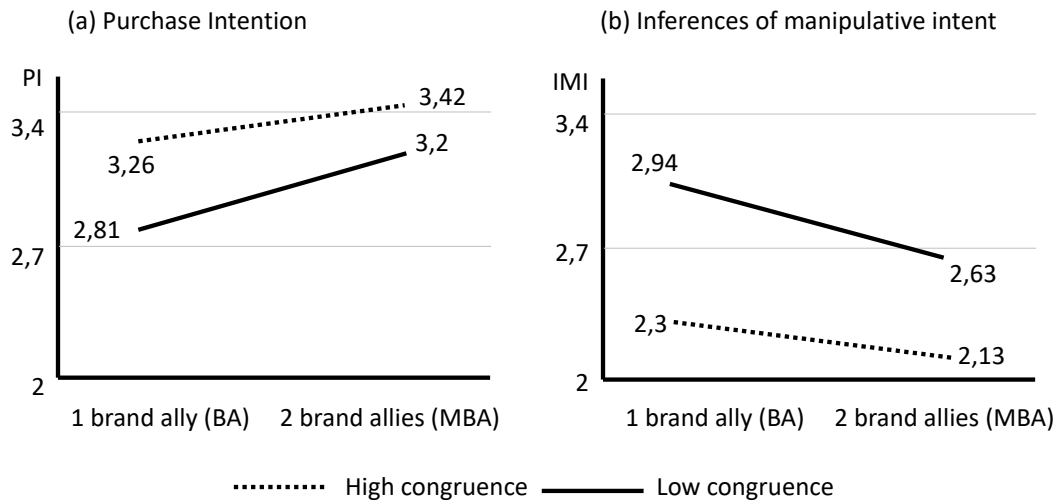



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**Note:** no BA – single-brand promotion, BA – promotion with one brand ally, MBA – promotion with two brand allies.

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Figure 2. Empirical model (mechanism B)

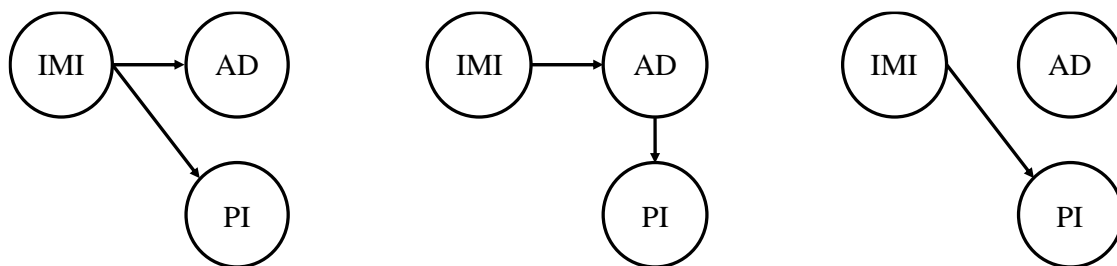



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**Note:** *PI* – purchase intention, *IMI* – inferences of manipulative intent.

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Figure 3. The moderating role of congruence of brand association combination



(a) Model 1: whole sample (b) Model 2: BA with 1 ally. (c) Model 2: MBA with 2 allies

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**Note:** *IMI* – inferences of manipulative intent, *AD* – attitude towards the ad, *PI* – purchase intention.

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Figure 4. SEM results

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [D. Muravskii]. The data are not publicly available due to them containing information that could compromise research participant privacy.