Modeling Brand Alliance Effects in Professional Services

Kristina Maiksteniene

Abstract—Various formal and informal brand alliances are being formed in professional service firms. Professional service corporate brand is heavily dependent on brands of professional employees who comprise them, and professional employee brands are in turn dependent on the corporate brand. Prior work provides limited scientific evidence of brand alliance effects in professional service area – i.e., how professional service corporate-employee brand allies are affected by an alliance, what are brand attitude effects after alliance formation and how these effects vary with different strengths of an ally. Scientific literature analysis and theoretical modeling are the main methods of the current study. As a result, a theoretical model is constructed for estimating spillover effects of professional service corporate-employee brand alliances and for comparison among different professional service firm expertise practice models – from "brains" to "procedure" model. The resulting theoretical model lays basis for future experimental studies.

Keywords—Brand alliances, professional services, corporate brand, employee brand.

I. INTRODUCTION

BRAND alliance research used to be associated with fast moving consumer goods and still dominates the research landscape in this context. However, in professional service firms, such as law offices, business consultancies, advertising, market research agencies and others, numerous formal and informal brand alliances are being formed between a corporate brand and its closely related entities – professional employee, another corporate brand, corporate supplier, corporate clients, professional association the company is affiliated to, company's branded methodology etc. Prior work provides limited scientific evidence of so-called brand alliance effects in professional service area – i.e., how professional service allies influence the alliance, how allies themselves are affected by an alliance, what are brand attitude effects after alliance formation and how these effects vary with different strengths of an ally.

Although professional services depend of a huge variety of temporary brand partners, they are people business and therefore most heavily dependent on the image and reputation of internal partners - professional people who comprise them. So, what happens when a corporate professional service corporate brand is linked to another brand signal in a form of

Kristina Maiksteniene is Senior Lecturer at ISM University of Management and Economics, Arklių str. 18, LT-01129 Vilnius, Lithuania (phone: +370-5-2123730; fax: +370-5-2123961; e-mail: krimai@ism.lt).

a professional person brand? Does person brand ally dilute the strength of the focal corporate brand? Is there a direct transference of value (positive or negative spillover) from a focal brand to an ally? In other words, does a well-known consultancy dilute or enhance its brand image by heavily promoting the names of its professional employees? Furthermore, how is the professional employee brand affected when he/she becomes associated with a more or less reputable corporate brand? Importantly, how do all these effects depend on the type of professional firm business model (expertise practice)?

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to construct a model to answer the following research question: what brand alliance effects occur between professional service corporate and professional employee brands and how these effects vary across different models of professional service firm expertise practices?

The paper begins with a focused review of brand alliance research, distinguishing prevailing brand alliance theory streams, revealing current research focus and identifying existing research gaps and defining and conceptualizing professional service brand alliances. Then, a theoretical model of brand alliance effects is being formulated to be tested by an experimental study. The model would identify major spillover effects of professional service corporate-employee brand alliances and compare them among the different professional service firm expertise practice models.

The theoretical value of this study lies in broadening the external validity of the brand alliance theory by analyzing brand alliances between different levels of constituents - i.e., heterogeneous brand alliances - corporate brand and service professionals - in a new distinct context (professional services) and with new variables (varying firm practice models). Although professional services depend of a huge variety of brand partners, this research is limited to analyzing corporate - professional person brand alliances, as an exemplary case for other professional service brand alliance types.

II. BRAND ALLIANCE RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A. Brand Alliance Conceptualization and Categorizations

Marketing discipline increasingly focuses on co-created value – a trend that, among other things, has been in the spotlight of recent scientific discussions on a so-called new dominant logic of marketing [1], [2], [3]. Brand alliances are facilitating this value co-creation.

As [4] note, the greatest brand value nowadays is being created in the intersections between individual brands. More

and more brand developers are turning to cooperative marketing arrangements, such as brand alliances (also referred to as co-branding, secondary associations, conceptual combinations, advertising alliances etc.) as a way of adding further value to their brand assets and reducing the risks associated with brand development. Interest in brand alliance practice has increased significantly in recent decades, with prominent examples, such as computers (IBM - Intel), credit cards (Citibank - Visa), mobile phones (Sony - Ericson), food (Diet Coke - NutraSweet), consumer appliances (Whirlpool-Philips) and many other brand alliances in different forms. Very broadly, the brand alliance used to be conceptualized as deliberate pairing of two or more brands with one another in a marketing context such as in advertisements, products, product placements, distribution outlets [5]. Numerous studies suggest that attitudes towards the brand can be transferred to other brands with which the brand is linked (e.g., [6]-[11]). Brand alliance is a marketing tool that capitalizes on such image transfer satisfying various business purposes ranging from tactical and short-term, such as to increase immediate sales [12] to strategic and long-term purposes, such as to strengthen certain image associations from partner brand to a target brand [13], [14].

In the marketing literature brand alliances used to be named by various names: co-brand, co-promotion, ingredient, dual, composite brand alliances [15]. In this paper, the most-prevalent term *brand alliance* is being used. This follows the lead of [16] who introduced the term to remain consistent with the brand-alliance related literature on strategic alliances from which he drew his conceptual ideas ([17]-[21]).

[22] distinguish between homogeneous and heterogeneous brand alliances:

1) *Homogeneous* brand alliance is when the brand allies with partners in the same product category;

2) *Heterogeneous* brand alliance is when the primary brand allies with partners in different product categories.

[23] distinguish between a "narrow" and a "broad" definition of brand alliances:

1) *Broad*: when brand alliance results in the creation of a new product, it usually signals to customers that the partners are committed to a long-term relationship.

2) *Narrow*: the alliances that are promotional and are either not perceived as permanent or do not result in the creation of a single product.

Much related is the distinction by [24]:

1) *Strategic (long-term)* brand alliances represent long-term associations and relatively large investments from both partners;

2) *Tactical (short-term)* brand alliances represent short-term alliances that usually cover promotional deals.

[25] distinguishes between "physical" and "symbolic" alliances:

1) *Physical alliances* occur where two or more brands are integrated into a new product in the form of an ingredient brand/component brand, composite brand extensions, bundled products with two or more brands either from one or many owners in an offering and true product combinations of two brands combined in a single existing product offering.

2) In *symbolic alliances*, brands are used to provide added meaning to a consumer through the transfer of their associations (example could be joint advertising co-advertising, joint sales promotion, co-packaging and celebrity endorsement).

In this paper, it is suggested to add another distinction – that between "internal" and "external" alliances:

1) *Internal* brand alliances are between company's own brands or brands that are temporarily controlled by the company (such as licensed brands);

2) *External* brand alliances are between company's own (or controlled) brands and other company's (or uncontrolled) brands.

Our aim is to encompass all these types and complexities of brand alliances in one definition. With this in mind, the associative network memory theory ([26], [27]) definition proves to be useful - from the perspective of this theory, a brand alliance is an associative relation between two or more brands. According to [14], when brands are linked to *other entities* that have their own knowledge structures in the minds of consumers, because of theses linkages, consumers may infer or assume that some of the associations or responses that characterize the other entities may also be true for the brand.

The concept of a brand alliance in this paper will be extended so that it is applicable to both non-commercial and commercial brands (term "brand" in this definition is also understood in its extended sense to signify both non-commercial and commercial entities):

Brand alliance *is a short- or long-term branding strategy when two or more brands are linked each to the other in a marketing context of a concrete product with the aim to transfer associations between the brands and/or to form new attitudes to the alliance product.*

B. Brand Alliance Research Foundations

Brand alliance research, as most research, is grounded in underlying assumptions or beliefs about what constitutes legitimate research and which research methods are appropriate for examining a particular phenomenon. This section summarizes research foundations adopted by major brand alliance research literature sources.

First, the brand alliance literature can be summarized guided by the Three Dichotomies model as a general taxonomical framework for marketing ([28], [29]). The framework proposes that all marketing phenomena, topics and issues can be classified using three categorical dichotomies of (1) profit sector/nonprofit sector; (2) micro/macro; (3) positive/normative. The three categorical dichotomies yield $2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8$ classes or cells.

Brand alliance literature over the past 20 years or so obviously falls into the cell "micro" (as it deals with marketing activities of individual units – consumers and customers, and focuses on internal marketing interests of firms, as opposed to the interests of society). Absolute majority of studies are in the "profit" sector (i.e., business activities are predominantly analyzed). The "positive/normative" dichotomy is a little more difficult to

resolve, although, majority of brand alliance research is attempting to describe, explain, predict, and understand rather than prescribe (e.g., brand alliance effects), thus it is more balanced towards "positive".

Second, the brand alliance literature can be summarized guided by ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological paradigms. A useful framework here is a philosophical dichotomy framework by [30]. This framework divides the paradigms in question into "soft" and "hard" dichotomies is used only to guide the classification and to display the counterpart to the philosophical perspectives (in fact, authors of the paper contend that the "soft" and "hard" debate cannot be resolved, and offers the metaphor of magnetic polarity as a means of reflecting this). This "soft"/"hard" classification is useful, as it allows to meticulously examine brand alliance literature sources. It is worthwhile noticing that majority of brand alliance research is experimental, which provides much information about brand alliance literature authors' dominant philosophical positions.

First of all, the *ontological* paradigm relevant to the brand alliance literature should be discussed. The relativist/realist dichotomy is proposed by [30] here. Interestingly enough, although majority of general brand literature is written in the relativist spirit (evoked by the undetermined definition of a brand), brand alliance literature can be proud to offer ontological plurality.

Epistemology is concerned with the meaning of knowledge with related concepts, the sources and criteria of knowledge. Brand alliance research can be discussed in light of three dichotomies – interpretivist/positivist, subjectivist/objectivist and emic/etic. Majority of authors of general brand alliance literature have opted for a positivistic stance. One of the influential reasons for that probably is that selected (especially American) journals are more likely to accept positivistic publications. In terms of subjective/objective dichotomy, brand alliance research is again positioned towards the later. That is, the influence of the authors' values, beliefs in experiments is not big. From the emic/etic perspective, research orientation is more that of the outside researcher who is seen as objective and the appropriate analyst of research (etic).

In accordance with the [30] framework, five primary *methodological* dichotomies – qualitative/quantitative, exploratory/confirmatory, induction/deduction, field/laboratory, idiographic/nomothetic – are briefly discussed. As already mentioned, majority of brand alliance research is quantitative. In most cases it is also confirmatory (concerned with hypothesis testing & theory verification). Induction/deduction is not that clear cut: both paths are being followed by the researchers. Laboratory experiments dominate the field (precise measurement & control of variables, but at expense of naturalness of situation, since real-world intensity & variation is not always achievable). Most brand alliance research is nomothetic (group-centred perspective using controlled environments & quantitative methods to establish general laws).

Finally, at the *axiological* level, one dichotomy is examined – i.e., that of relevance/rigor. Rigor is heavily emphasized in

brand alliance literature: research is characterised by hypothetico-deductive testing according to the positivist paradigm, with emphasis on internal validity through tight experimental control and quantitative techniques.

To summarize, the brand alliance research can be characterized as being more on the "hard" side according to the [30] framework. However, many single literature sources are on the opposite side, and still many of them are in the "gray" zone.

C. Theories of Brand Alliance Effects

Brand alliances are now heavily researched and there are at least several theories developed to examine the topic. Some of them are ineligible or limited to single publications, so they will be omitted from the analysis, and only the main types will be briefly discussed.

Each theory uses its own approach to view the brand alliances and explain their effects. In the subsequent chapters the essence of each theoretical approach is discussed.

Information integration theory. According to [31], the information integration theory describes the process by which stimuli are combined to form beliefs or attitudes. Following this theory, attitudes or beliefs are formed and modified as people receive, interpret, evaluate, and then integrate stimulus information with existing beliefs or attitudes; the more salient or accessible a brand attitude, the more likely it is that the individual will access that attitude upon observing cues associated with the brand and will bias information processing in a direction implied by the valence of those attitudes [32]. The supporters of information integration theory claim that consumer view towards the brand alliance influences the future image of each alliance member. According to information integration theory researchers (e.g., [5], [33]), changed image of both alliance partners is one of the measures of effectiveness of brand alliance effectiveness and this change occurs because of the so-called spillover effect. Scientists within this theoretical school analyze how the change in image is being moderated by some other factors – for example, brand fit or image congruity of the two brands.

Context effect theory. [32] claim that, with brand alliances, one brand certainly is presented in the context of the other and vice versa, so that judgments about the brand alliance are likely to be affected by prior attitudes toward each brand, and subsequent judgments about each brand are likely to be affected by the context of the other brand. The brand alliance stimulus information, presented through advertising or by experiencing it directly, accesses related affect and beliefs about those brands and products that are stored in memory. [34] explored the effect that one brand has on another when both brands are combined in a single product. They detected a form of assimilation where consumer affect was transferred from one consumer product brand to another. In this study, when one average focal brand was paired with a high-quality brand, the evaluation of the focal brand was higher than when it was paired with a low-quality ally even though participants were explicitly instructed to evaluate each component separately. [16] described a mechanism for the transference of affect between allied brands. They showed that consumers assume that a high-quality product will ally itself only with

other high-quality products because they know that managers will be motivated to avoid damaging their product's reputation by a poor alliance.

Signaling theory. [16] were among the first scientists who attempted to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of joint branding using signaling approach (by the way, they also introduced the term "brand alliance" to describe joint branding situations, arguing for the need to remain consistent with the literature on strategic alliances, from which they drew some conceptual ideas). According to signaling theory, when a new brand forms alliance with many established brands, consumers use the perceived quality of the established brands (so-called secondary brands) as cues to form their evaluation of the new brand (so-called primary brand). The new brand may gain considerable credibility once established brands "endorse" it by forming alliances. In the paper, two characteristics of brand alliance portfolio have been examined: the quality level of the secondary brands and the heterogeneity of product category (same vs. different). In her thorough and innovative study [35] makes a strong statement of the brand as an object of an informational economy. She studies economy using media theory. Here, a signal is an informational device that, for sellers of different levels of quality, is differentially costly to provide [16], [36].

Associative memory network theory. Associative memory network theory ([37], [27], [15]) view semantic memory as an interrelated body of knowledge comprised of nodes and links. A node is a representation in semantic memory that consists of a piece of stored information. Related nodes are connected by links, which represent associations of varying strength. This entire collection — nodes connected to other nodes by links — makes up the so-called associative network. In this structure, every node is related to every other node, with the sense that a set of links, however indirect and long, can eventually be traced between any two nodes. The primary process that operates in this memory structure is "spreading activation", which is the mental activity of accessing and retrieving information from the network. The strength of association between the activated node and all linked nodes in the network handles the spreading activation process and determines the information that can be accessed in memory. If the nodes comprising the network are strongly related, the spreading activation that occurs should be extensive and allow access to much brand information.

In this paper, the associative network memory theory is predominantly used to define, explain and substantiate brand alliance effects.

Table I summarizes the four most prevalent theories to analyze brand alliance effects and exemplary scholarly works that are based on these theories.

TABLE I
MOST PREVALENT THEORIES ANALYZING BRAND ALLIANCE EFFECTS

Information integration theory	Context effects theory	Associative memory networks theory	Signaling theory
[5], [32], [33], [63], [65]	[66], [67]	[15], [68]	[16], [56], [69], [70]

D. Brand Alliance Research Summary and Research Limitations

Scientific research provide extant evidence that brand image, or certain associations, may be transferred from one brand to the other (e.g. [6]-[11], [38]-[44]). Brand alliances capitalize on this brand feature.

Most authors agree that at least one of co-branding partners has to be a familiar brand with which people have developed favorable associations ([23], [45], [46]).

Brand alliances may signify a wide range of activities, ranging from a simple short-term dual sales promotion to long-term cooperative strategies, where brands, organizations and other entities may be strongly involved [13]. Alliance goals in each of these cases are very different. For example, primary objectives in short-term dual sales promotion are to increase immediate sales by capitalizing on joint opportunities for sales growth and profits, whereas the primary objective of co-operative (alliance) arrangements is to exploit synergies from a business standpoint.

Below, a short chronological account is provided of some major brand alliance research findings that lead to the conclusion about the research gaps to be filled in (note: the entire list analyzed, although has yet to be fully written up in this paper):

[47] demonstrated insignificant negative spillover effects from an endorser to the brand under limited conditions.

[48] showed that in a brand alliance situation, the combined equity of the brands increases beyond their individual equity levels.

[49] examined the effects of resource dependency and contract exclusivity on the attitudes and intentions of consumers in brand alliances. Their findings indicate that attitudes of the brands before the alliance (pre-attitudes) have a positive effect on the attitude toward the alliance, which has a positive effect on perceived quality of the alliance, willingness to pay a premium price and purchase intention. Further, attitudes toward the brands after the alliance (post-attitudes) reveal a positive spillover effect for both the host and ally brands.

[50] found evidence of positive spillover effects using scanner data, where focal brand evaluations were affected positively when the partner brand performed well. However, the evidence of negative spillover was unclear.

[51] formulated a theoretical model of franchise brand alliance representing a complex structure of motivational and inhibiting facets that are intrinsically linked and appear to work synergistically.

Thus, various effects have an impact on how brand image is going to change in a particular brand alliance. To summarize, some of the important findings from the previous brand alliance experiments are as follows:

- In a brand alliance situation, the combined equity of the brands increases beyond their individual equity levels.
- Brands that have engaged in many prior alliances are also affected significantly.
- Spillover effects do not necessarily affect the partners equally.

- Prior attitudes toward the partner brands affect attitudes toward the alliance.
- Partners do not necessarily contribute equally to the alliance.

However, important gaps can still be identified in previous research on brand alliance effects, prioritized here as follows:

1) Extant research on brand alliance effects has been performed predominantly only with *consumer products* (with only a couple of exceptions of airline, bank and non-profit alliances);

2) Extant research on brand alliance effects has been performed predominantly with *homogeneous brands*;

3) Extant research on brand alliance effects has been performed with *commercial brands* (corporate or product, again, with only a couple of exceptions in non-profits).

These three significant gaps can be filled in by constructing a theoretical model of professional service brand alliance effects (i.e., service product, heterogeneous brands, at least one non-commercial partner in an alliance) and identifying moderating effects of professional service firm expertise models (the fact that the allies may vary in their brand salience has never been accounted in previous research).

III. CONSTRUCTING A THEORETICAL MODEL OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICE BRAND ALLIANCE EFFECTS

A. The Choice of Focus for the Theoretical Modeling

The number of allies. In order to investigate professional service brand alliance effects, a choice of focus needs to be made and substantiated. That is, which concrete professional service brand alliance and why could serve as a role model for analyzing the brand alliance effects? Professional services typically encompass more than one brand alliance. Several authors analyzed a question of how many partners it is optimal to ally with. But management and monitoring of multiple-brand alliances is complicated. Luckily, majority multiple-brand alliance theory is quite a straightforward extension of two-brand alliance theory. This is one of the reasons, why in the current paper, a theoretical model with a type of dyadic (two-brand) brand alliance is being presented. In addition, multiple (networked) brand alliances would be much more complicated to analyze by an experimental method.

Alliance constituents.

Let's start from some of the typical characteristics of professional services that have been highlighted by [52]:

- Value creation is knowledge intensive and delivered by highly educated employees, who are frequently closely linked with research and scientific development within their area of expertise.
- Services are based on a professional assessment (diagnosis) by experts in the field.
- Services involve a high degree of personal judgment by the experts involved.
- Delivery involves a high degree of interaction with the client representatives, for diagnosis as well as delivery.
- Individuals are typically trained in a standardized body of knowledge which is common to all

professionals in that sector and is certified by the relevant professional authority.

From this bullet point list, it is easy to spot the crucial role of a professional service employee as the key player and a key attitude builder for an ultimate alliance product. Professional employee brand is the brand that directly participates in a client value creation processes, and not merely signals the quality of a focal (corporate) brand. From the point of view of the market, professionals are strong brands by themselves who may even overshadow the professional service corporate brand [53]. Professionals are important product brands that contain discriminating professional service information. A professional person is a signal to customers about the attributes of the professional service firm bearing that brand (signaling theory). On the other hand, via intense communication of a company-professional brand alliance, corporate brand may become an important part of practitioners' personal identity and vice versa [54]. Because of these various mutual effects, the need for analyzing brand relations and interactions between the employee brand and a corporate brand is of particular importance.

Let's specify the definition of the professional service corporate-employee brand alliance that is a focus of this paper:

Professional service corporate-employee brand alliance is a short- or long-term branding strategy where a professional service corporate brand and professional employee are marketed together with the aim to transfer associations between the brands and/or to form new attitudes to the professional service alliance product.

Some may argue whether a corporate – professional person relation is not that of a product and its ingredient or, alternatively, that of two hierarchically related brands (brand and sub-brand). It is therefore important to accentuate that a professional employee is neither ingredient, nor sub-brand in its very essence, as it is often a major professional service firm value proposition. Also, professionals are not a part of formal professional service firm brand architecture; they are often organized loosely within a flat structure.

Especially given the often temporary nature of professionals with changing affiliations, the concept of corporate-employee brand alliance almost perfectly reflects the professional service brand alliance conceptualization.

B. Professional Service Corporate-Employee Expertise Models

Most professional service firms transform the knowledge of their employees to create value for their clients [52]. However, professional service firms differ in terms of which – corporate brand or employee brand is the epicenter of unique expertise. In other words, companies differ in their expertise models, and this is an important moderator to account for when analyzing corporate-employee brand alliances.

[55] proposes a so-called professional service "spectrum of practice" - identifying the three kinds of client works: "brains", "grey hair" and "procedure" projects. According to him:

1. In the first type ("Brains"), the client's problem is at the forefront of professional or technical knowledge, or at least is

of extreme complexity. The firm that targets this market will be attempting to sell its services on the basis of the high professional craft of its staff. Brains usually involve highly skilled and highly paid professionals. This is the case where professional employee brand is likely to be relatively more salient than the corporate brand.

2. "Grey hair" projects require a highly customized "output" in meeting client needs, but they involve a lesser degree of innovation and creativity in the actual performance of the work than would a brains project. Since for Grey-hair type projects the problems to be addressed are somewhat more familiar, at least some of the tasks to be performed are known in advance and can be specified and delegated; the opportunity is thus provided to employ more junior staff to accomplish these tasks. This is the case where professional employee brand is likely to be moderately salient in relation to the corporate brand.

3. "Procedure" project usually involves a well-recognized and familiar type of problem. In essence, professional service firm sells its procedures, its availability. Procedure projects involve the highest proportion of junior staff time. This is the case where professional employee brand is relatively less salient than the corporate brand.

It is reasonable to expect that these professional service firm expertise models are likely to be moderators for the brand alliance effects where the two allies may vary in their brand salience.

IV. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL AND STRUCTURAL MODEL

In order to evaluate the professional service firm (PSF) corporate-employee brand alliance effects, conceptual and structural model is constructed.
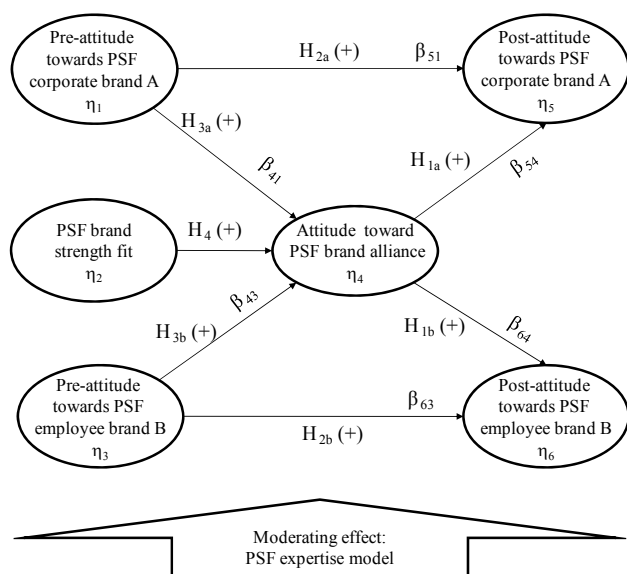

Fig. 1 Conceptual model of professional service brand alliance effects

The proposed conceptual model in Fig. 1 depicts the relationships among attitude towards a professional service corporate-employee brand alliance and its antecedents and consequences. i.e., attitude toward the brand is used as a dependent variable. Although some researchers prefer to use a multidimensional view of attitude (e.g., consisting of hedonic and utilitarian constructs [56], for the purpose of current research this is not necessary and would add a heavy burden of experimental complexity [57].

As depicted in this model, pre-attitudes toward the focal and ally brands have an impact on customer attitudes toward the alliance, but the effects of pre-attitude toward the ally brand on attitude toward the alliance are moderated by the type of the PSF expertise model. In addition, the PSF expertise model moderates both the effects of attitude toward the brand alliance on post-attitudes toward the host and ally brands and the spillover effects of the host and ally brands.

When developing hypotheses for this conceptual model, two fruitful avenues will be utilized: 1) previous empirical studies that examine a variety of brand alliance effects; 2) general theoretical and conceptual work in existing literature, with a heavy concentration on associative memory network theory.

V. MODEL THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION AND HYPOTHESES FORMULATION

A series of hypotheses will now be developed to explain and explicate this model. The first four hypotheses (H1-H4) will be *closely* but *extendedly* replicated from [32]. This replication is justified by the arguments of [58], supporting case for the epistemic significance of replication from the perspective of a critical realism. According to [59], in "close" replication, the major result is expected to recur.

On the other hand, the original hypotheses will be extended by: 1) testing the model in a completely new context - professional services (vs. consumer goods by most previous research); 2) including heterogeneous [22] brand relations – i.e., those between the corporate and employee brand (vs. homogeneous brand relations by previous research); 3) including completely new moderating effect - the professional service expertise model (hypotheses H5-H6).

The paper of [32], which is the closest source of inspiration for our model, was based on a combination of various theories, including bundling, brand extension, information integration and attitude accessibility. Building on the bundling literature [32] examined brand-related information as a viable attribute in evaluating the bundle and further extended the bundling literature by examining attitudinal spillover effects on the individual components, or brands, of the bundle.

Development of each hypothesis will be supported from the *associative memory network perspective*. This perspective will be combined with the reminder theoretical perspectives of previous studies that used information integration theory to support analogous hypotheses.

When an employee of a professional service firm suffers a reputation problem, a professional service company should be concerned about the negative spillover on its corporate brand. As [32] deducted from the standpoint of information integration theory, because the brand alliance potentially represents new evaluations and associations for both brands,

attitude toward the alliance itself can influence how both brands are evaluated. Applying this finding to the professional service brand alliance setting, it is expected that attitudes toward each participating brand change when consumers process information about collaborative relationships (e.g., advertisement informing about the professional service firm and its professional employee) or experience the product of an alliance (e.g., by using the consulting service by a particular professional who belongs to a particular professional service firm). Based on the *associative memory network perspective*, it can be explained that partner associations are triggered through the alliance associations by activating the association base of any of the alliance partners. Thus, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1a: Client attitudes towards the professional service brand alliance are related positively to client post-exposure attitudes about corporate brand.

Hypothesis 1b: Client attitudes towards the professional service brand alliance are related positively to client post-exposure attitudes about professional service employee (ally) brand.

However, post-attitudes towards employee or corporate brand may simply result from the pre-alliance attitudes towards those brands. In order to control for these effects, there is a need to evaluate this predictive relationship, similarly to the control relationships in [32], [60] and other studies. Based on the associative memory network perspective, it can be inferred that the same partner associations should be triggered before and after brand alliance formation by activating the same identity elements. This observation yields the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Prior attitudes toward a corporate brand are related positively to post-exposure attitudes toward that corporate brand.

Hypothesis 2b: Prior attitudes toward a professional service employee brand are related positively to post-exposure attitudes toward that employee brand.

The attitudes that a customer had about the corporate and professional brands are likely to influence the brand alliance directly. [32] have demonstrated similar effects on congruent consumer brands. Consistent with information integration theory, the evaluations associated with the brands will be retrieved automatically when the brand and its associations are accessed in memory by the presentation of a brand alliance cue. From the standpoint of the *associative memory network perspective*, since brand alliance contains (or is a combination of) identity elements and associations from both brands, the individual brand associations are triggered by activating the brand alliance elements. Thus, it is expected that favorable prior brand attitudes towards professional service corporate brand will yield relatively favorable attitudes toward the brand alliance. Respectively, favorable prior brand attitudes towards professional employee brand will yield relatively favorable attitudes toward the brand alliance.

Hypothesis 3a: Prior attitudes toward the constituent corporate brand are related positively to attitudes toward the corporate-employee brand alliance.

Hypothesis 3b: Prior attitudes toward the constituent employee brand are related positively to attitudes toward the corporate-employee brand alliance.

When a professional service corporate brand and professional employer brand are presented jointly or in the context of one another, both brands' evaluations are likely to be elicited together with certain stored brand-specific associations [61]. According to [6], [32], if the two images are inconsistent (for example, a reputable professional service firm employs a professional with lower than average reputation), customers might activate a causal search, questioning why these two brands are associated. In this case, undesirable beliefs and judgments may be activated. Therefore, when there is a low perception of brand fit between the professional service corporate brand and a professional employee brand, the alliance will likely be evaluated less favorably than in opposite, high fit conditions. *Associative memory network perspective* would support this line of thinking, as, according to it, transfer of associations is more easily achieved between the associative networks of similar strength [27]. Thus, the hypothesis is being formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 4: Brand strength fit between corporate brand and employee brand is related positively toward the corporate-employee brand alliance.

There is a wide spectrum of professional service company expertise practices. According to [55] classification of professional service practices, either corporate brand or employee brand can be at the epicenter of unique expertise, constituting a so-called "procedure" model or "brains" business model, respectively. These two different models would likely result in differential effects in information processing and corporate/professional brand evaluation. For brands that, in a given case are at expertise epicenter (i.e., employee brand in the „brains" model or corporate brand in the „procedure" model), the relative degree of liking may be better established [62]. From the *associative memory network perspective,* the very fact that the particular brand is a more prominent "expert" produces additional strong, unique and favorable (according to [14]) associations in that brands' associative memory network.

Consequently, in the brand alliance context, the relative contributions of partner brands on alliance evaluations are likely to depend on their comparative levels of brand expertise. The psychological mechanism of attitude accessibility [63] is likely to be activated when comparing across partners (e.g., between β_{41} and β_{43}). The partner with greater „expertise weigth" would be expected to exert greater attitudinal impact on the brand alliance. For example, „PricewaterhouseCoopers", being more a „procedure" model professional service company, would contribute more to the corporate-employee brand alliance than would any of its employees.

Hypothesis 5a: Brands with greater (lesser) weight of expertise than their partners in a given alliance arrangement will contribute more (less) to the professional service brand alliance ($\beta_{41} > \beta_{43}$, in „procedure" professional service business model, and $\beta_{41} < \beta_{43}$ in „brains" professional service business model).

The above mentioned professional service expertise asymetries are likely to result in asymetries of the alliance spillover effects on the ally brands. For a partner with greater „expertise weigth" compared to a partner with lower „expertise weigth", the brand alliance is expected to exert a relatively stronger influence on subsequent brand attitudes. The supporting argument from an *associative memory network perspective* is that partners with greater „expertise weigth" have more extensive network of prior associations, and, in particular, an additional strong, unique and favorable association of being an "expert".

For example, Kevin Clancy, being a professional brand in a „brains" model management consultancy would exert a relatively higher spillover to the respective corporate-employee brand alliance than a corporate brand „Copernicus Consulting".

Hypothesis 5b: Brands with greater (lesser) weight of expertise than their partner in a given alliance arrangement will experience greater (lesser) spillover effects than their partners ($\beta_{54} > \beta_{64}$, in „procedure" professional service business model, and $\beta_{54} < \beta_{64}$ in „brains" professional service business model).

There are professional service business models that have balanced corporate and professional expertise strengths (e.g., so-called „grey hair" professional service models by [55]. In such models, attitude accessibility would be balanced for both allies. Therefore, the brand alliance effects on subsequent brand partners will expected to be equivalent. From the standpoint of the *associative memory network perspective*, such symmetric brand alliance would take equal weight of associations from one brand and from the other. Thus, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 6a: Professional service brands with equal weight of expertise will contribute equally to the brand alliance ($\beta_{41} = \beta_{43}$).

Hypothesis 6b: Professional service brands with equal weigth of expertise will experience equal spillover effects ($\beta_{54} = \beta_{64}$).

VI. CONCLUSION

Brand alliances so far have been studied with the use of several theoretical approaches. Four theories for an alternative explanation of the primary brand alliance mechanisms are identified: information integration theory, context effects theory, signaling theory and associative memory network theory. Literature review shows that signaling theory is the current dominant theory, followed by the associative network memory model theory.

After indicating major brand alliance research findings, three important research gaps have been identified in previous research on brand alliance effects, prioritized here as follows: 1) practically no research on brand alliance effects has been performed with heterogeneous brands; 2) brand alliance effects have been little investigated with non-consumer products, and services in particular; 3) brand alliance effects have been little investigated with non-commercial brands (corporate or product, again, with only a couple of exceptions in non-profits).

In order to evaluate professional service brand alliance effects, a conceptual and structural model has been constructed. The model depicts the relationships among attitude towards a professional service corporate-employee brand alliance and its antecedents and consequences. i.e., attitude toward the brand is being used as a dependent variable. Pre-attitudes toward the focal and ally brands have an impact on customer attitudes toward the alliance, but the effects of pre-attitude toward the ally brand on attitude toward the alliance are moderated by the type of the PSF expertise model by [55]. The PSF expertise model also moderates both the effects of attitude toward the brand alliance on post-attitudes toward the host and ally brands and the spillover effects of the host and ally brands.

To test this model, quantitative longitudinal experiment is suggested, due to its virtue to supply evidence of causality [64]. The experiment would enable to evaluate the spillover effects of major types of professional service brand alliances and compare these effects across different professional service firm expertise practices.

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