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Defining a Political Brand Alliance: The Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to posit a definition of a political brand alliance, and thereby advance the political marketing and brand marketing literature. This is achieved by building upon and extending Erevelles et al (2008, p.32) definition of brand alliance, and applying it to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties' Westminster level coalition, established in 2010. The paper argues that:

“A political brand alliance is the association between two or more independent political party brands. The perceived value of the integrated offering may or may not be enhanced in the minds of the electorate. It does not involve explicit joint-branding efforts by the partners in the alliance. Neither does the alliance seek to present the integrated political offering as one joint political party in the market place. It may to some extent involve a change in the meaning of the political product of each political party brand in the coalition. However, a political party's product would not effectively cease to exist in the absence of the brand alliance” (Adapted and Extended from Erevelles et al, 2008, p. 32)

Keywords: politics, brand alliance, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats

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1. Introduction

The 2010 British General Election produced an historic result with no one party being able to command a majority in the House of Commons. This was particularly peculiar as the Westminster First-Past-the Post (FPP) system of voting has traditionally produced stable working majorities for one political party to govern on its own. Thus the result was that the Labour Party (the ruling Party since 1997) came second on number of constituencies gained, finishing behind the Conservative Party. Despite the Conservatives under the leadership of David Cameron able to secure the most constituencies and therefore the most MPs, the Conservative Party was still short of an overall majority in the House of Commons and thus faced the choice of trying to govern as a minority administration, or attempting to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrat Party, under the leadership of Nick Clegg. The latter was the preferred course of action, and as the result the two parties agreed (after several days of negotiation) to form a coalition government.

There is a widely developed political marketing literature which at its heart seeks to explain and / or conceptualise how one political party is successful or otherwise in gaining a majority in the Westminster FPP electoral system (Egan, 1999; Harris and Lock, 2001; Lees-Marshment, 2005; Savigny, 2005; Wring, 2001). A substantial gap in theory building however exists for the present situation whereby no one political party has a majority, and thus faces the prospect of being in coalition with another political party at Westminster. Given the relative rarity of the FPP system not producing an overall majority this is to be expected, since for academic research in political marketing to have relevance and currency, it has indeed been rational for theorisation to occur on the assumption that the FPP system of voting will produce a one party government. This assumption behind the models and theories political marketing has produced is further justified in that political marketing as a relatively young discipline (Baines and Egan, 2001; Moufahim and Lim, 2009) has not experienced coalition politics at Westminster level. It is therefore likely that Westminster political marketing research in the coming years will have significant opportunities for intellectual advancement and development, as scholars build, re-build, refine, extend and extrapolate Westminster level theories and models of political marketing. This will be no simple task, and along the way errors and misconceptualisations are likely to occur, but at the end of this period of electoral history political marketing research is likely to have been significantly advanced.

In composing this article the author starts his thought process from the basis of what marketing theories exist in the current literature that may have some scope to explain the current Westminster electoral situation. The author therefore began to ‘critically’¹ consider what commercial marketing theories may have import in explaining the present electoral situation. The focus of the author’s deliberations was in relation to the coalition alliance between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrat Party, and what marketing theories may have some relevance in explaining the relationship between the two parties. The author

¹ This author recognises that the import of commercial marketing theories into political marketing may not be completely replicable given conceptual differences between the commercial and political markets (Baines and Egan, 2001; Butler and Collins, 1994; Egan, 1999; Lock and Harris, 1996; O’Shaughnessy, 2001). Hence, the critical interpretation of this paper.

recalled that one of the growing themes in commercial brand marketing literature were in relation to how and why organisations formed brand alliances. This paper therefore critically examines how the theory of brand alliance may have relevance to the explaining the coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. The theory of brand alliance was deemed to have particular relevance given the growing literature on the application of branding principles to political parties (e.g. Davies and Mian, 2008; French and Smith, 2010; Gelb and Sorescu, 2000; Needham, 2005; 2005; Phipps et al, 2010; Reeves, 2007; Reeves, de Chernatony and Carrigan, 2006; Schneider, 2004; Smith, 2001; Smith and French, 2009). The paper will now progress to consider one definition of a brand alliance, and its possible revision and extension into a form useful for describing a political brand alliance. Discussion will be from the perspective of the Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition.

2. Analysing a Definition of Brand Alliance in the Context of the Conservative –Liberal Democrat Coalition

This article uses the following definition of brand alliance as a basis for discussion.

A brand alliance is: *“the association between two or more independent brands so that the perceived value of [the] integrated offering is enhanced in the minds of the consumer. It does not involve explicit joint-branding efforts... by the partners in the alliance, that seek to present the integrated offering as “one” entity in the market place. It also does not involve a change in the “meaning” of the integrated product, in such a way that the integrated product would effectively cease to exist in the absence of the brand alliance”* (Erevelles et al, 2008, p. 32)

In electing to utilise this definition this author is aware that there are other definitions of brand alliance that may have been deployed (e.g. Bluemelhuber et al, 2007; Dickinson et al, 2007; Gammoh et al; 2006; 2010; Rao et al, 1999). The problem with many of these definitions is that they are written in a linguistic form that is more suited to corporate rather than political entities. Whereas Erevelles et al (2008) definition is produced in an article that is inherently commercially focussed, the language which is used in the definitional scope of the article has some degree of replicable currency to the political marketing context of this paper, above and beyond that of any other widely disseminated article on brand alliances. It should be noted that within the brand alliance literature, there remains some degree of contestability over the definitional bases of the brand alliance construct (Cornelis, 2010; Tsantoulis and Palmer, 2008). As Rao et al (1999, p.259) notes brand alliances can “include all circumstances in which two or more brand names are presented jointly to the consumer”. On these grounds, the paper approaches definitional issues from a critical lens.

2.1 Brand Alliance: An Association Between Two or More Independent Political Brands

Erevelles et al (2008) suggests that a brand alliance represents an association between at least two independent brands. This clearly has relevance to the coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, since: (i) they are working together as two parties sharing power in the Westminster government; (ii) the governmental agenda is espoused in a coalition agreement, and; (iii) both parties serve in a combined cabinet whereby departmental offices of state are shared equitably between the two parties, and thus have joint responsibility for implementation of coalition policies. However the association between the two political party brands is somewhat different to what would be observed in a commercial brand alliance,

given that a commercial brand alliance is more likely to be one of fully consensual strategic choice, whereas a political brand alliance is a choice that is perhaps more one out of necessity to form a stable government. Given concerns about the applicability of applying the principles of branding to government (O'Shaughnessy, 2003), the paper advocates an approach to brand alliance at a collaborative political party level. Erevelles et al (2008) notes in their definition that the two brands in a brand alliance are independent. This stipulation clearly has relevance to the posited brand alliance between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats as the two political parties retain their own independent governance, organisational, policy making, values, and membership architectures, that would exist if the two parties had not been in coalition with each other. Hence a party's product would "not effectively cease to exist in the absence of the brand alliance" (Erevelles et al, 2008, p.32)

2.2 Voters' Perceptions of the Value of a Political Brand Alliance

The emphasis of Erevelles et al (2008) definition is firmly in the domain of consumers' interpretation of a brand alliance. Drawing upon the received wisdom that voters can be conceptualised as consumers (Nimmo, 1975; Peng and Hackley, 2009; Shama, 1975; Thrassou et al, 2009), the definition deserves further attention in terms of the perceptions of voters towards the brand alliance between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat brands. Accordingly it should be recognised that consumers [or voters] will have built over time cognitive and emotional brand associations in the memory for each individual [political party] brand name before the brand alliance (Dickinson and Barker, 2007; James, 2005). It therefore follows that before a brand alliance is formed [political] "consumers may have developed a variety of associations with brand names that are suddenly paired" (Washburn, 2000, p.593). This has complex implications for how they continue to evaluate the quality of brands individually and jointly in the brand alliance (Rao and Ruekert, 1994). Erevelles et al (2008) contends that the perceived value to consumers of a brand alliance will be enhanced. Thus their assumption seems to be that a brand alliance results in improved brand image in the minds of the consumer. This observation is open to some degree of debate, and has been a subject of discussion within the commercial brand alliance literature that recognises in practice that brand alliances "can enhance or detract from consumers' perceptions of each constituent brand" (Cornelis, 2010, p. 779) (Ahn et al, 2009; Bluemelhuber et al, 2007; Chang, 2009; Dickinson and Heath, 2006; James, 2005; Washburn et al, 2000). More particularly in the context of a political party brand alliance, it is likely to be the case that the perceptions of brand image as a result of a brand alliance may either improve or deteriorate for the combined brand alliance, or for individual parties in the brand alliance. A critical feature impacting on this is whether [political] consumers perceive there to be an acceptable level of 'fit' between the organisations in the brand alliance (Ahn, 2009; Bluemelhuber et al, 2007; Dickinson and Barker, 2007; Dickinson and Heath, 2006; Rao et al, 1999), and their individual brand personalities (Chang, 2009; James, 2006; Monga and Lau-Gesk, 2007). Thus in such circumstances there needs to be consideration as to what extent and magnitude voters perceive the Liberal Democrat and Conservative Parties as having an acceptable degrees of 'fit' and what impact this may have in future voting decisions. Another related theme are the perceptions of the each brand before the brand alliance, and how and to what extent are there spillover effects over time (either positive or negative) from one brand to the

other, and to the brand alliance (Dickinson and Barker, 2007; Dickinson and Heath, 2006; Rodrigue and Biswas, 2004; Simonin and Ruth, 1998; Washburn et al, 2004). For example, a question may be posed as to what extent the Liberal Democrats' values such as , for example; 'fairness' and 'freedom' may lead to increasing (or decreasing) positive brand associations for the Conservative Party, and/ or the wider coalition?

2.3 A Political Brand Alliance Does Not Require Explicit Joint Branding Efforts

Erevelles et al (2008) states that a brand alliance: "does not involve explicit joint-branding efforts... by the partners in the alliance, that seek to present the integrated offering as 'one' entity in the market place" (Erevelles et al, 2008, p. 32). This is clearly applicable to the posited Conservative- Liberal Democrat brand alliance as both parties retain their own distinct brands. Reeves (2007) examined what constitutes an internal political party brand in the specific context of the Liberal Democrat Party and found that the internal political brand was perceived by people inside a political party as a eclectic phenomemena comprising a substantial and varied number of components (e.g. logo, visual identity, values, language / messages, political party community, policy [structures and processes], communication tools, people, brand name etc). In many cases, these listed components of the brand remain distinct and independent in both political parties. For example, both parties retain key elements of their political marketing strategies. This includes: (i) their own logos and visual brand identities (French and Smith, 2010; Lock and Harris, 1996; Smith, 2001); (ii) their values (Baines et al, 2003; Butler and Collins, 1994; Henneberg, 2002; Newman and Sheth, 1987); (iii) policy making processes and structures (Baines et al, 2002, 2003; Reid, 1988); (iv) political party community comprising leadership (Davies and Mian, 2008; Harris and Lock, 2001; Lock and Harris, 1996; Ormrod and Henneberg, 2010, 2011), professionals (O'Cass, 2001; Ormrod and Henneberg, 2008; 2011), activists and members (Bauer et al, 1996; Butler and Collins, 2001; Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, 2009; Lock and Harris, 1996; Ormrod and Henneberg, 2010, 2011), and; (v) most importantly of all they retain their own independent brand names (Lock and Harris, 1996; Schweiger and Adami, 1999). This is not to say the independence of their brand components may at times be strained through the nature of the coalition. For example, there may be accusations within and between the two parties that: (i) their values are being compromised to keep the coalition together; (ii) the language and messages of the coalition government is having too high a degree of transference onto the internal politics of the political parties; (iii) that the democratic structures of the Liberal Democrat Party with respect to policy making is not being given enough consideration, and/or; (iv) senior leader, personalities and professionals are not keeping sufficient distance from the other party in the coalition. However at present, and looking ahead to future elections, the brand alliance is unlikely to evolve: "in such a way that the integrated product would effectively cease to exist in the absence of the brand alliance" (Erevelles et al, 2008, p. 32)².

² This rests upon the assumption that in the forthcoming general election that both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties contest the campaign as fully independent parties and do not move in the direction of any merger, electoral pact, or targeted tactical campaign against the Labour Party in some constituencies. Such consideration is at this time is purely speculative, and will be an area of research which will require consideration, if and when such issues arise.

2.4 A Political Brand Alliance May Result in an Adjustment in the Meaning of the Political Product

One facet of Erevelles et al (2008) definition is however inapplicable to a political party brand alliance in that it specifies that a brand alliance: “does not involve a change in the meaning of the integrated product” (Erevelles et al, 2008, p. 32). This is unreplicable to the posited Conservative- Liberal Democrat brand alliance in that there has been in some circumstances a perceived change in the meaning of the integrated political product. This is inevitable given the nature of the coalition whereby both parties have to negotiate/ bargain a common position that combines elements of each party’s policies. A topical and much publicised example of where the integrated political product’s meaning has changed is with regards to university tuition fees policy³. This is a controversial, yet clear example of how the political product changes as a result of a political party coalition/ brand alliance. It is the nature of coalition politics that the political brand’s product will change through party bargaining, and there will inevitably be many examples in the future of electorally perceived political product change.

3. Conclusion: Positing a Definition of a Political Brand Alliance and Its Limitations

In conclusion building upon the preceding discussion of Erevelles et al (2008) definition of brand alliance, this paper proposes the following definition of a political brand alliance:

“A political brand alliance is the association between two or more independent political party brands. The perceived value of the integrated offering may or may not be enhanced in the minds of the electorate. It does not involve explicit joint-branding efforts by the partners in the alliance. Neither does the alliance seek to present the integrated political offering as one joint political party in the market place. It may to some extent involve a change in the meaning of the political product of each political party brand in the coalition. However, a political party’s product would not effectively cease to exist in the absence of the brand alliance” (Adapted and Extended from Erevelles et al, 2008, p. 32). *Figure 1* in the appendix to this paper depicts how this definition relates to elements of Erevelles (2008, p.32) original definition, and above discussions.

This paper has a number of limitations which should be acknowledged. The first is that the paper is conceptual rather than empirical. Hence, the theory which is built will require empirical validation. The second limitation is that the theories of brand alliance are under-developed in the commercial marketing literature, and there is likely to be future academic research which may be useful to augment our understanding of political brand alliances. A third limitation is that the contribution’s focus of analysis has been in terms of the posited Conservative-Liberal Democrat brand alliance, and does not consider how political brand alliances may function between other political parties in other parliaments, councils, and other democratically elected bodies within the U.K and internationally. A final limitation of the paper is that it draws upon a very specific literature. It is likely to be fruitful to consider how other academic literatures on matters such as strategic alliances, and international comparisons of coalitions may further our understanding of political marketing and political party coalitions. In short, whilst there are limitations associated with this paper, these limitations may be considered through future empirical research.

³ The Liberal Democrats campaigned in the run up to the 2010 General Election on the basis that university tuition fees (currently just over £3000 would be scrapped). However, recently the coalition government made policy that in effect means that tuition fees may in some universities be near tripled from current levels up to £9000. In addition, it was not made clear before the election that the Conservatives may intend to increase university tuition fees to this level.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Comparing and Contrasting Definitions of a Commercial and Political Brand Alliance Based on Erevelles et al (2008) Definition

Paper Section	Commercial Brand Alliance	Political Brand Alliance
Section 2.1 Brand Alliance: An Association Between Two or More Independent Political Brands	“the association between two or more independent brands”	“the association between two or more independent political party brands”
Section 2.2 Voters’ Perceptions of the Value of a Political Brand Alliance	“the perceived value of [the] integrated offering is enhanced in the minds of the consumer”	“the perceived value of the integrated offering may or may not be enhanced in the minds of the electorate”
Section 2.3 Political Brand Alliance Does Not Require Explicit Joint Branding Efforts	<p>“It does not involve explicit joint-branding efforts... by the partners in the alliance that seek to present the integrated offering as “one” entity in the market place”</p> <p>“the integrated product would... [not] effectively cease to exist in the absence of the brand alliance”</p>	<p>“It does not involve explicit joint-branding efforts by the partners in the alliance. Neither does the alliance seek to present the integrated political offering as one joint political party in the market place”</p> <p>“a political party’s product would not effectively cease to exist in the absence of the brand alliance”</p>
Section 2.4 A Political Brand Alliance May Result in an Adjustment in the Meaning of the Political Product	“It also does not involve a change in the meaning of the integrated product”	“It may to some extent involve a change in the meaning of the political product of each political party brand in the coalition”