HOW SUPPLIER BRAND BENEFITS AFFECT RETAILER'S WILLINGNESS TO INVEST.

Work-in-progress paper

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how supplier brands affect retailers' willingness to cooperate and invest further with suppliers of those brands. Suppliers seek to exert market control through their brand strategies while retailers seek to reduce the impact of this dependence. Following a literature review and some preliminary in-depth interviews, a conceptual framework was devised. This framework views brands as market-based assets for suppliers, which have important benefits for retailers. This conceptual framework was tested by means of a retailer survey and a structural model analysis. Previous research had demonstrated the impact of these brand benefits on satisfaction and related relationship outcomes. This research investigates the relative strength of suppliers and their effects on retailer dependence. The study also examines the supplier's brand strength as well as the value of the category to the retailer. The findings show the four supplier brand benefits influence retailer dependence associated the supplier brand, which in turn affects cooperation and retailer willingness to invest further in the brand. In addition, brand strength moderates the retailer dependence-cooperation pathway, demonstrating that while high equity brands encourage retailer cooperation, brand strength does not affect a retailer's willingness to invest. One brand benefit, manufacturer support was important for retailers with high value categories.

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INTRODUCTION

In the distributive trade most suppliers, are dependent on retailers to achieve the necessary distribution of their brands. Furthermore, to implement aspects of a brand's marketing strategy often requires retailer cooperation beyond the mere purchasing and display of manufacturers' brands. Many commentators have highlighted that suppliers' relationships with retail buyers is now more difficult due to the increasing global presence of retail chains and consolidation of retail ownership within many markets. Co-operation between retailers and manufacturers is necessary for successful channel management of manufacturer brands and ensures brand availability for end-customers. For resellers such as supermarket and general merchandise retailers, cooperation with manufacturers benefits their store assortment and influence profitability (Grewal & Levy, 2009). However, tension also exists in the relationship which means that the retailer's willingness to invest resources in the relationship with a supplier maybe constrained by competitive considerations with other retailers, supplier competition including private label supply and the power of suppliers' brands.

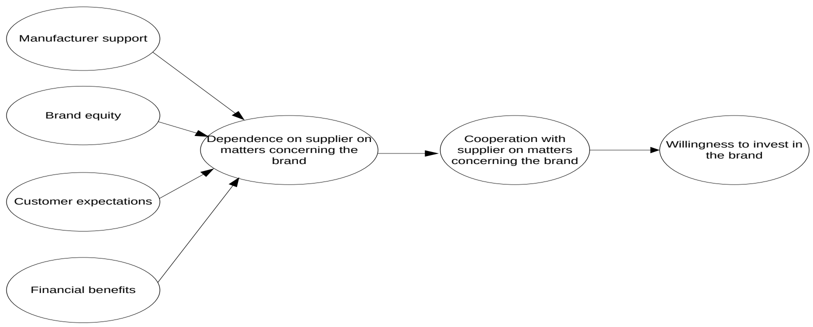
This study examines the effects of supplier brands on retailer dependence, cooperation and willingness of retailers to invest in the brand itself. Although dependence has been portrayed as a negative outcome of trade relationships it is also can be seen as the glue that binds relationships together. The task of managing supplier's brands has prompted suppliers to alter their corporate strategies in order to improve return on investment for their brands emphasising key account management to enhance the supplier retailer relationship. Furthermore, many suppliers spend much of their marketing support in the form of trade promotion with retailers.

METHODOLOGY

The overall research question is: How do differences in supplier benefits influence retailer supplier dependence and retailer engagement with the supplier to develop the relationship further? This research question suggests the following sub-questions: First, which manufacturer brand benefits impact on retailer dependence? Second, how does this retailer dependence on the supplier brand benefits influence other relationship outcomes such as cooperation, and willingness to invest further in the relationship? Third, how do these differences in the supplier brand strength influence retailer relationship outcomes? The last sub-question is to what extent does the importance of the product category to the retailer influence their willingness to engage with the manufacturer's brand?

The role of brands as a supplier resource for retailers was investigated using a multi-method research design. The design first consisted of exploratory, qualitative research, followed by a confirmatory, quantitative phase which tests five hypotheses. In the first phase, the author interviewed eight retail buyers from the supermarket and liquor industries. In the second phase, the conceptual model (Fig. 1) was developed and then tested. In this model, four supplier brand benefits influence retailer dependence with the brand (a mediating construct) which in turn influences cooperation towards the brand and then retailer willingness to invest in the brand. These antecedents were based on the literature and the qualitative interviews.

Figure 1: The Effects of Supplier Brand Benefits on Relationship Outcomes



LITERATURE REVIEW

Supplier Brand Benefits

Brands are a useful resource or market-based asset, which enable firms to build external relationships (Hanssens, Rust, & Srivastava, 2009). Underlying this market-based assets perspective is the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Gillis, Combs, & Ketchen, 2013). This perspective is useful for understanding how brands and other market-based assets create value for resellers within a channel, leading to competitive advantage. Market-based can also include aspects of business relationships such as dependence and cooperation. Dependence is critical in establishing strong distribution chain relationships, which and benefits both supplier and retailer by ensuring brand availability for end-customers (Gilliland, Bello, & Gundlach, 2010).

Within channels of distribution (Porter, 1974), both manufacturers and retailers seek to optimise value and achieve efficiencies. However the reality of retailing is that distribution takes place amongst a network of manufacturers, retailers and customers (Anderson, Håkansson, and Johanson, 1994). In this network environment, the brand can be regarded as a ‘resource tie’ that links manufacturers and retailers together in order to serve the end customer (Ford, 1998).

Many of the studies on the effects of supplier’s brands on relationships with retailers (e.g. Biong, 1993) do not address cooperation nor consider the influence of the retailer’s customer (Webster Jr, Malter, & Ganesan, 2012). Webster et al. (2012) highlight a mistaken assumption that brands are only about B2C relationships and that the full implementation of a marketing strategy involves B2B relationships with retailers as well the end-customer. Glynn, Motion and Brodie (2007) identify several benefits of supplier brands for retailers, which include the end-customer as well as other business considerations. These brand benefits include financial benefits, managerial benefits including brand support as well as consumer expectations that the brand would be available in store as well as the market demand for the brand. Davis and Mentzer

(2008) investigated the effects of brand equity on dependence and found that brand equity had more effect than trade equity and that the strength of the brand also affected dependence.

Channel Dependence

Channel dependence is defined as the degree to which a channel partner provides resources for which there are few alternative sources. Thus no firm is entirely self-reliant and dependence increases for firms when the outcomes of such relationships are of value such as better volume and profit. Retailer dependence also increases where there are few alternatives to the supplier's brands. Bonner & Calantone (2005) examined the role of a weaker party between dealers and major and minor suppliers in the office furniture industry. Dealers considered themselves economically dependent on the primary supplier but not on the minor supplier. The use of power positively affects the relationship between the major supplier and dealer, but does not affect the minor supplier. Major suppliers make less use of influence tactics than minor suppliers.

There are two types of power, one being coercive and the other non-coercive. A non-coercive source of power is the supplier brand, which creates market demand and obliges retailers to carry the brand in the retail assortment often to counter competitors. Within distribution channels, non-coercive sources of power are more likely to encourage retailer cooperation compared with coercive power sources, which have the opposite effect (Skinner, Gassenheimer & Kelley, 1992). Skinner et al.'s (1992) research also found that dependence positively influenced cooperation. Higher levels of dependence on a particular brand means that a retailer will make an effort to maintain the relationship with the supplier. As a non-coercive power source, brands help suppliers build retailer relationships through ensuring the end-customer purchases the brand through the retailer.

Thus, the first research hypothesis is:

H_1 The brand benefits associated with the supplier's brand positively influence retailer dependence on the manufacturer.

Cooperation

Dependence and non-coercive sources of power are related positively to cooperation, unlike coercive sources of power. Cooperating with other firms makes fewer resource demands as the resources are shared. Inter-firm cooperation should allow market-based assets to enhance cash-flow within the relationship (Dyer & Singh, 1998). However the strategies used for market-based assets require reseller cooperation (Glynn, Motion, & Brodie, 2007). Caniëls & Gelderman (2007) considered inter-firm cooperation was necessary to maximise channel profit. Other research shows found that brand name reputation and cooperation to be negatively related, as brand names with less equity will be more likely to use interfirm resources (Gillis, Combes & Ketchen, 2013).

Cooperation occurs when one channel member initiates a transaction, which leads to behavior described as cooperative and occurs when there is influence and power. When parties are dependent, a power difference exists between channel members. Cooperation arises when there is influence and power between supply chain members. Thus, there is a mutual dependence between retailer and supplier. Brands can be seen as non-coercive source of power within a channel relationship. Cooperation between retailers and suppliers is also necessary for successful channel management. Cooperation is acting in a way to maximise joint value and involves actions taken by firms in interdependent relationships to achieve similar outcomes. For supermarket and general merchandise retailers, cooperation with suppliers benefits their store assortment and influences profitability (Dunne, 2008). Cooperation also allows suppliers to focus on the category more strategically with retailers and not just emphasise margins or pricing (Cheng, 2011).

Cooperation is an important relationship-facilitating variable (Min et al., 2005). Cooperation is essential in achieving coordination and was an important variable in firm adaptation in a relationship (Goffin, Lemke, & Szwejczewski, 2006). It is suggested that cooperation also gave firms more flexibility in dealing with changing business conditions. Cooperative norms were a key relationship connector in collaborative relationships as opposed to more transactional relationships (Cai, Yang, & Hu, 2009). Gómez, Maratou, & Just (2007) discussed particular types of trade promotions that were linked to increased reseller cooperation, namely manufacturer consumer promotions and reseller incentive programs. The manufacturer must have the influence to achieve reseller cooperation (Poddar & Donthu, 2012), which is assisted through high allowances or discounts, strong interpersonal attraction, compensation and monitoring. Cooperation was strongly correlated with trust and flexibility (Johnston & Hausman, 2006). Carson, Madhok, & Wu (2006) regarded cooperation as a control mechanism, which lowered opportunism within franchising arrangements.

Anderson, Håkanson and Johanson (1994) propose that a network identity construct, which reflects the anticipated resource, activity and actor relationships, had a positive effect on cooperation and commitment. Comparison outcomes for the firm and for other alternative suppliers were linked to cooperation as firms sought to maintain the satisfactory nature of past outcomes. Another aspect of supplier-retailer relationships is the willingness of buyers to invest in supplier offerings and is an important outcome of relationship quality. Skinner et al. (1992) examined cooperation in terms of dependence and sources of power. The second hypothesis examines the pathways between dependence on the manufacturer's brand and retailer cooperation on matters concerning the brand:

H_2 Retailer dependence with the manufacturer's brand positively influences a retailer's cooperation with the manufacturer on matters concerning the brand.

Willingness To Invest

Another aspect of supplier-retailer relationships is the willingness of buyers to invest in supplier offerings and is an important outcome of relationship quality. Supplier reputation affects a buyer's willingness to invest (Suh & Houston, 2010) as well as dependence (Kim & Frazier 1997). In contrast, Moon and Tikoo (2004) showed reputation did not affect a buyer's willingness to invest. Hogarth-Scott and Dapiran (1999) found while power and dependence were integral to supply chain relationships, cooperation with retailers on joint activities such as category management helped build commitment. Thus the third hypothesis is that:

H_3 Retailer cooperation on matters concerning the supplier's brand influences a retailer's willingness to invest in that brand.

Brand Strength

Brand strength effects have been investigated in the consumer literature but not in a business-to-business setting. For business-to-business buyers, manufacturer brands are a source of risk reduction. Risk reduction becomes important to buyers when the purchase is more complex, requires more service and support and when time and other organizational limitations exist (Mudambi, 2002). Manufacturer brands not only have a short-term or transactional value in terms of risk reduction, but buyers can obtain further value through longer-term relationship commitments (Buchanan, 1992). For resellers, brands can offer a set of expectations about the product and level of value. Moreover, strong inter-firm relationships allow resellers to leverage this value further (Subramani & Venkatraman, 2003).

Verbeke, Bagozzi and Farris (2006) find that brand strength is more influential than a manufacturer's key account program in determining a reseller's allocation of shelf space and promotional slots. However Verbeke et al.'s (2006) research measures brand strength as innovation and customer fit but ignores brand preference and does not compare major with minor brands. Furthermore, their findings show no linkage between brand strength and relationship outcomes such as trust. The fit of the brand with resellers is also important, as research shows the contribution of the dealer is greater when selling lower equity brands such as volume or economy brands than selling prestige car brands (Verhoef, Langerak & Donkers, 2007).

Thus, suppliers of high brand equity lines have more power with retailers who depend on them to generate store traffic. While retailers benefit from closer relationships with suppliers, the opposite can also occur. For instance, suppliers of strong brands may cut distribution costs, which leads to less cooperative relationships (Ryu, Park, & Min, 2007). To counter this channel power retailers have expanded their private label range and have added more niche or minor brands. This expansion reduces the retailer dependence on major brands.

As a result, resellers may offer further business opportunities to manufacturers of minor brands to reduce the reseller's dependence on the major brand supplier within a category. Firms with more dependence have a greater interest in maintaining the relationship and the brand is a source of non-coercive or referent power (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Ogbonna and Wilkinson (1998) found that the major U.K grocery brand manufacturers and the top resellers are mutually dependent, but that resellers are more likely to develop strategic alliances with manufacturers of minor brands. Other research observes that such channel relationships can be unbalanced because of the power differences between large resellers and small manufacturers (Hingley, 2005). These inter-organizational resource effects for brands appear to be contrary to the brand literature, which assumes that a strong brand means 'greater trade cooperation and support'. Resellers therefore seek to address any power imbalance caused by strong market demand for a manufacturer's brand (Buchanan, 1992). Thus the fourth hypothesis proposes:

H_4 Brand strength influences the effects of dependence, cooperation and willingness to invest that retailers show towards a supplier's brand.

Product category effects

Category management is a key tool of relationship collaboration used internationally by manufacturers and retailers (Jones, 2005) to optimise the exchange value of such resources between brand manufacturers and retailers. Category management means that retailers seek to optimise category profits overall rather than managing manufacturer brands independently within the category. The benefits of category management for retailers are better category performance and inventory management. For manufacturers these benefits include the integration of the brand and retailer customers' strategies rather than having separate strategies (Cheng, 2011). Manufacturers also welcome the opportunity to focus on the category more strategically with retailers and not just emphasise margins or pricing (Cheng, 2011). Previous research (Glynn et al., 2007) shows the influence of the product category on how retailers regard supplier brands thus the last hypothesis is:

H_5 The value of the product category influence the dependence, cooperation and willingness to invest that retailers show towards a supplier's brand.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design first consisted of exploratory, qualitative research, followed by a confirmatory, quantitative phase. In the first phase, the author interviewed eight retail buyers from the supermarket and liquor industries. Preliminary interviews conducted by the authors with resellers of manufacturer brands in the supermarket and liquor industries explored the effects of brands on channel relationship outcomes. The interviews showed that four manufacturer brand benefits were important and influenced reseller satisfaction with the brand. These brand benefits were the financial benefits, manufacturer brand support, the resellers' assessment of brand equity and customer expectations for the brand. Financial benefits were the volume potential and price deals associated with the supplier's brand. Manufacturer support included aspects such as brand advertising, cooperative advertising, and whether the brand was a key part of the reseller's range and important in category growth. Consumer brand equity reflects the reseller's assessment of customer preference for a brand compared to a competitor. Customer expectations refers to whether resellers thought customers expected the brand to be available and customer concerns if that brand was not available in store (Nilsson, 1977). The interviews also found these manufacturer brand benefits influenced relationship outcomes such as dependence and cooperation with the manufacturer on matters concerning the brand.

Several participants commented that a good relationship was necessary with a certain soft drink supplier in order to perform well in the category (financial benefit). In contrast one person commented the stronger the brand, the greater the likelihood of it being used as a loss leader (brand equity). Another retailer observed that even if the relationship with the supplier was not good, the retailer would not disadvantage themselves as long as customers liked the suppliers' products (consumer expectations). Retailers also commented that they rely heavily on bigger brands (dependence) and were more likely to give suppliers of these brands more appointments and better promotional weeks (cooperation). Because suppliers had followed the retailer's suggestions, those brands were performing better and the retailer responded by distributing the brand to all of their outlets, which indicated a willingness to invest further in the brand.

In the second phase, the conceptual model (Fig. 1) was developed and then tested. In this model, four supplier brand benefits influence retailer dependence with the brand (a mediating construct) which in turn influences cooperation towards the brand and then retailer willingness to invest in the brand. The measurement model of these antecedents showed good fit: χ^2 (59) = 262, p = 0.000, CFI = 0.99, NNFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.065. Existing scales measured retailer dependence on the supplier (Johnson, 1999) and cooperation on matters concerning the brand (Skinner et al., 1992) and willingness to invest (Kumar, Scheer & Steenkamp, 1995). For the willingness to invest items, retailers were asked if they would support the brand more in the future if asked to by the supplier.

In the second phase, data was collected with a mail survey of supermarket retailers in New Zealand using the key informant methodology. These informants were the managers responsible for product ordering in eight selected categories for each store. The categories consisted of 6 grocery and 2 liquor categories. A questionnaire was sent to 1404 category buyers in 357 supermarkets. Each buyer rated two brands, a major and a minor brand from different categories out of eight (a total of sixteen brands). The major and minor brands were identified from each category using the BAV (Brand Asset Valuator) index (Mizik & Jacobson, 2008). Appropriate pre-testing with both retailers and experts in research design was undertaken to ensure that the research instrument was valid and reliable. Seven-point Likert scales recorded the retailers' responses on their dependence on and cooperation with suppliers on matters concerning the sixteen brands as well as their willingness to invest further in the brand. The number of responses was 410, and as each buyer evaluated 2 brands the final sample size was 820, representing a response rate of 30%.

FINDINGS

The results in Table 1 show a good fit of the model to the data: χ^2 (197) = 796, p = 0.000, CFI = 0.99, NNFI = 0.99 and RMSEA = 0.059 for the full sample. Key fit indices are above the 0.95 threshold, the RMSEA is close to 0.05 and the normed chi-square was 4.0. Turning to the structural pathways, three of the four supplier brand benefits significantly influence dependence. Brand equity and consumer expectations had the greatest effect on dependence followed by financial benefits. However, the manufacturer support pathway to dependence was non-significant. Dependence was significantly related to cooperation, which in turn strongly influenced willingness to invest.

Table 1. Structural model results, full sample, major and minor brands

	Full Sample n = 820		Major brands n = 414		Minor brands n = 406	
Structural pathways	Std. estimate	t-value	Std. estimate	t-value	Std. estimate	t-value
Manufacturer support→dependence	.10	1.1	.06	0.4	0.13	1.33*
Brand equity→ dependence	.32	6.8	0.28	4.8	0.36	5.1
Customer expectations→ dependence	.30	4.5	0.20	2.7	0.25	3.3
Financial benefits → dependence	.24	2.7	0.21	1.9*	0.25	2.3
Dependence →cooperation	.69	11.2	.80**	8.0	0.65**	8.4
Cooperation →willingness to invest	.76	13.5	.66	9.1	0.84	9.2

**= significant difference at $p < 0.05$.

To further validate the model, alternative pathways were considered. The model was re-estimated with pathways from brand benefit antecedents directly to cooperation and willingness to invest as well as from dependence to willingness to invest. This re-estimation showed a slightly worse fit to the data: χ^2 (188) = 851, p = 0.000, CFI = 0.98, NNFI = 0.97 and RMSEA = 0.066. Mediation analysis confirmed that dependence partially mediates between the four brand benefits dimensions and cooperation. Cooperation also mediates between dependence and willingness to invest, so another alternative model, with a pathway from dependence to willingness to invest was estimated. The fit statistics, χ^2 (197) = 824, p = 0.000, CFI = 0.99, NNFI = 0.98 and RMSEA = 0.062, show the initial model is a better fit.

Next, the dataset was split to analyse the major and minor brands. The structural model shows a good fit to both datasets. For the major brands, the normed chi-square was 2.6 and for the minor brands the normed chi-square was 2.7. As with the full sample, the manufacturer support pathway to dependence is not significant for both samples. However for the major brands the financial benefits to dependence pathway is marginally significant. A multi-group analysis of brand strength effects showed no difference between the major versus minor brands for the brand benefit pathways to dependence, but there was a difference for the dependence to cooperation pathways with retailers being more likely to cooperate with suppliers of major brands. For this pathway the change in chisquare was 4.2 which exceeded the threshold of 3.84 $p < 0.05$. The effects of brand benefits on dependence for the major and minor brands was for the most part the same except for the financial benefits which were marginally significant t= 1.9 at $p < 0.05$. However, retailers are more likely to cooperate with suppliers of major brands, which was confirmed with a subsequent multigroup analysis.

The first research question is answered as retailer dependence on supplier brands is influenced by three dimensions namely brand equity, financial benefits and consumer expectations, but not manufacturer support. The brand equity, consumer expectations reflect the role of the brand as a market-based asset. The ability for retailers to profit directly from financial benefits was also important. However, a more indirect benefit manufacturer support was not important. Next, the second research question is addressed as dependence on the supplier brand is positively related to cooperation with manufacturers on matters concerning the brand. Furthermore, cooperation prompts a greater willingness further in the brand. The answers to the third question show that the model is valid for both major and minor brands, but those retailers are more likely to cooperate with suppliers of major brands, however there was no difference between the brand types for the cooperation to willingness to invest pathway. The effect of brand strength was uneven across the relationship outcomes.

To investigate the further research question of the difference between the high value categories in the sample beer and wine and the lower value categories grocery lines the sample was split into a high value dataset and the low value dataset. The results are reported in table 2. The results show that manufacturer support is important for high value categories. Also for the high value categories the financial benefits are only marginally significant. The results for the high value categories are in contrast to the overall results in that manufacturer support impacts on retailer dependence. High value categories generally indicate a greater purchase commitment by the retailer, thus manufacturer support becomes important in reducing that risk.

Table 2 Structural Model Estimation High and Low categories

	Full Sample *n* = 820		High Value *n* = 237		Low Value *n* = 583	
Structural pathways	Std. estimate	*t*-value	Std. estimate	*t*-value	Std. estimate	*t*-value
Manufacturer support→dependence	.10	1.1*	.60	2.6	-.01	-0.29
Brand equity→ dependence	.32	6.8	.47	4.6	.27	4.6
Customer expectations→ dependence	.30	4.5	.25	2.4	.30	3.3
Financial benefits → dependence	.24	2.7	-0.34	-1.66**	.41	3.5
Dependence → cooperation	.62	11.2	.75	5.8	.69	10.0
Cooperation → Willingness to invest	.76	13.5	.78	6.4	.77	11.8
Chi-square (*df*=141)	797	*p*-value	440	*p*-value	603	*p*-value

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature has not previously considered the impact of supplier brand benefits on relationship outcomes such as dependence, cooperation and willingness to invest. The implementation of many aspects of marketing strategy for brand suppliers does require cooperation with retailers. From the supplier point of view, willingness to invest further with the suppliers' brand not only indicates reciprocity in the business relationship but also a signal that the end-customers are also purchasing the brand. This study further shows that the effects of the brand benefits on relationship action is mediated by the dependence on the supplier brand which is present in all channel relationships. Not all brand benefits influenced retailer dependence, as manufacturer support found by Biong (1993) to be important was non-significant in this study. The customer-based benefits brand equity and customer expectations, have a greater impact on dependence than financial and manufacturer support, which are more retailer focused. For the full sample, the largest standardised estimate however was from cooperation to willingness to invest. Thus, an important role for supplier key account representatives is to encourage retailer cooperation which results a greater willingness to support the brand. This finding shows that brands are important non-coercive sources of power and can encourage retailer activity with suppliers.

This result also confirms Skinner et al.'s, (1992) findings on the effects of dependence on cooperation. Retailer cooperation with suppliers on brand matters is mediated by dependence. The research further shows that cooperation mediates between the dependence and willingness to invest constructs. These results indicate that the disposition to cooperate with the brand supplier is a prerequisite for further brand investment. This research also confirms the conceptual framework generalises to both major and minor brands. With the minor brands, financial benefits affect retailer dependence indicating that suppliers of these brands need to provide monetary incentives to encourage retailer cooperation. The market demand for major brands gives suppliers an advantage, as dependence affects cooperation more compared to minor brands. However, this greater cooperation does not mean that retailers will invest further in major brands, so minor brands are not necessarily at a disadvantage when it comes to channel support. Although the results showed that manufacturer support was not an influence on dependence, further analysis of this data that manufacturer support was important in the case of high value brands.

In summary, the results address the overall research, which shows the effects of supplier brand benefits on relationship outcomes. For the first research question, only three supplier brand benefits had an impact on retailer dependence. Retailers were not dependent on manufacturer support. For the second research question, the results showed significant pathways effect between retailer dependence, cooperation and willingness to invest. For the third research question, retailers were more dependent on suppliers of high strength brands and were more able cooperate with these suppliers, but not any more willing to invest in their brands compared to minor brand suppliers. For retailers with high value product categories manufacturer support is particularly relevant. A contribution of this study is that when considering relationship outcomes such cooperation and willingness to invest suppliers should be cognizant of the different effects of brand strength and the value of the product category.

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