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Review of the doctoral dissertation

titled **“Building competitive advantage in Bangladesh’s FMCG sector—the perspective of customers”**

Written by Mrs. Patricia Orelly under the supervision of
prof. Joanna Bednarz, Ph.D. and Tomasz Bieliński, Ph.D.

The subject of the review is the doctoral dissertation written by Mrs. Patricia Orelly titled *“Building competitive advantage in Bangladesh’s FMCG sector—the perspective of customers”*. The reviewed PhD dissertation was prepared under the supervision of prof. Joanna Bednarz with the support of dr. Tomasz Bieliński from University of Gdańsk, Faculty of Economics.

The basis for the review is the letter from prof. Przemysław Borkowski, Head of Economics and Finances Discipline Board, regarding the appointment of the undersigned as a reviewer of the doctoral dissertation of Mrs. Patricia Orelly. The structure of the review consists of the following parts: assessment of the topic choice, purpose and research hypotheses, structure and content of the PhD dissertation (including research methodology), technical and stylistic remarks, and the final conclusion.

Dissertation topic choice

The topic of the reviewed dissertation is interesting from both a cognitive and practical viewpoint. In my opinion, the problem presented in the doctoral thesis is very topical and important taking into account the world processes. Firstly, the globalization and international expansion of companies led to the rapid saturation of the markets in developed countries. For further international development, companies look for new markets with high demand potential. Secondly, Bangladesh belongs to emerging economies with a large number of consumers who may be potential clients for both local and foreign companies.

Next, the demand and buying intentions of customers have to be supported by many different activities of producers, especially when they come from a different cultural background. Cultural differences can affect many elements of foreign companies entering a particular market, e.g. product and communication strategy. In many cases, to achieve the goal of a large number of sales, the adaptation strategy is necessary. It has to take into account the local customers' preferences, needs, customs, level of customer patriotism, and many others. Such decisions allow companies to build a competitive advantage. Last but not least, the FMCG industry is widely "sensitive" when it comes to all the processes and elements presented above. Therefore, the findings of the research undertaken in the Ph.D. dissertation can have interesting implications for both local and foreign enterprises that would be interested in conducting business in this country. Taking all this into consideration, the topic choice seems even more pertinent and significant.

Research objectives, research hypothesis and research questions

The aim of the dissertation, indicated by the Author on page 4 of the Introduction of the dissertation, is "(...) *to explore and determine the characteristics and aspects that influence the building of a competitive advantage in the FMCG sector*".

I consider such a formulation of the main objective of the dissertation correct. All the more so, as on pages 4 and 5 the Author provides the way of interpreting and explaining some of the terms used above. I would like to point out one remark concerning the possibility of condensing the main purpose. In my opinion, the words "characteristics and aspects" could be reworded into aspects. Aspects have a broader meaning than characteristics while, at the same time, including them. But, this is a matter for further discussion.

Subsequently, on pages 5-6 of the Introduction, the Author presents five objectives of the dissertation:

"1. Consider the competitiveness of Bangladesh from the perspective of companies in the FMCG sector.

2. Identify the cultural values that currently represent the culture from the perspective of Bangladeshi consumers and that should be part of the competitive advantage in the FMCG sector.

3. Identify the approach of ethnocentrism from the perspective of Bangladesh consumers.

4. Evaluate the preferences of Bangladeshi inhabitants from their perspective concerning the building of a competitive advantage in the FMCG sector in Bangladesh.

5. Identify the preferences of Bangladeshi consumers from their own perspective concerning the relevant attributes of a brand.”

I have the following concerns regarding these objectives:

- Usually, there is one main objective of the doctoral thesis (that I thought was presented on page 4) and several specific objectives. In the case of the reviewed dissertation, I would suggest considering the aim presented on page 4 as the main objective and those presented on page 5 as the specific objectives. The specific objectives, described on page 5, point to more elaborated issues and present a broader point of view.

- Objective 2 sounds like it has an answer that cultural values “should be part of the competitive advantage in the FMCG sector”. In my opinion, it looks like a conclusion that takes into account the research findings.

The Author describes the main hypotheses formulated for the purpose of the dissertation and presented in the next part of the Introduction (page 7):

“H1. Consumers in Bangladesh favor brands that represent respect for tradition.

H2. Local products are preferred by Bangladeshi consumers.

H3. Bangladeshi consumers prefer brands that position themselves through differentiation.

H4. Quality of goods is the most important aspect for building a competitive advantage.”

I consider formulated hypotheses to be correct and associated with the objectives. However, it is a pity that the hypotheses were not directly preceded by the analysis of the literature sources as an indication of the basis on which they were formulated. In such a situation, the following question arises: what was the knowledge base for the formulation of the hypotheses? Hypotheses should also be related to the research questions posed earlier.

Next, Author presents the research questions which (as Author underlines on page 7) “include an additional aspect that the hypotheses and objectives do not capture”. They concern ethnocentrism of the Bangladeshi consumer (no. 1), cultural aspects of the Bangladeshi consumer (2), competitive advantage strategy (3), brand (4), instruments of competitiveness and CRM (5-10). These research questions are as follows:

- “1. Would customers currently buy foreign products within the FMCG sector?*
- 2. What cultural attributes should the products represent?*
- 3. How should a company within the FMCG sector build a competitive advantage strategy in Bangladesh?*
- 4. What attributes are the most important when buying an FMCG product?*
- 5. In which price segment should the product be?*
- 6. Where does the consumer usually become aware of a product?*
- 7. Where does the consumer usually buy products for daily use?*
- 8. When does the consumer usually make the purchase decision?*
- 9. Is it important for the consumer to be constantly in touch with the products?*
- 10. What are the differences between age and gender considering the instruments of competitiveness?”*

I have the following reservations concerning the research questions (RQs):

- 1) RQs should be formulated at the beginning of research process to identify the research gap, not at the end. In general, the order should be as follows: RQs, main and specific (not obligatory) objectives, hypotheses (based on the literature). I hope that such procedure was applied and the order of the presented elements is unfortunate.
- 2) RQs should be closely connected to research hypotheses. The scope of the RQs presented in the dissertation is more extensive than the hypotheses. It should be underlined that RQs relate to hypotheses, but they are much broader. Sometimes the hypotheses are hypothetical answers to research questions.

Structure and content of the dissertation

The dissertation contains 172 pages. It consists of an abstract (in Polish and English), introduction, 6 substantive chapters, discussion, conclusions and recommendations, list of references, list of figures, list of tables, and appendixes. The structure of the reviewed dissertation is proper, clear and logical. The references encompass 196 positions with the predominance of scientific papers, followed by monographs, reports of e.g. World Bank, and others. The references are suitable to the topic.

In the following paragraphs, the subsequent sections of the dissertation are discussed with an indication, in my opinion, of their strengths and weaknesses.

The introduction of the dissertation comprises of all the prerequisite elements, i.e. the justification of the topic choice, the presentation of the research objectives and research hypotheses, research methods and research stages as well as the structure and content of the dissertation.

Chapter number 1 *“The concept of competitiveness and competitive advantage”* consists of a set of general information about competitiveness, its definitions, significance in the activities of companies. It includes theoretical aspects and refers to many authors who research this field. Within the presentation of competitiveness, the problem of competitive advantage is described. In further parts of Chapter 1, the Author concentrates on the sector and company levels of competitive advantage, which is very adequate for the purpose of the dissertation as well as research scopes and units. Next, the Author presents the enterprise’s *“resources and their importance in building the competitive advantage”* (p. 20) and then the types of competitive advantage associated with the environment of companies. These sections are good studies that present the general concepts and achievements of other authors. It is worth mentioning that, in some parts of this chapter, the Author adds Her opinions and comments.

The title of chapter number 2 *“Influencing the competitive advantage: impact of national culture and instruments”* suggests that its main issue will be a national culture and its instruments (elements). The fact is that there is a mixture of elements presented in this chapter – depending on companies and consumers. The more transparent solution would be to divide this chapter into two separate ones – presenting firstly the elements of companies’ strategies (as brand, CRM, price, product, etc. – now they are 2.2.-2.4.) and secondly, the elements of national culture – as consumers’ perspective. The title of the dissertation emphasizes the *“perspective of customers”* and that is why, a reader expects more information about this perspective. The second solution entails leaving this chapter as it is, but changing the title (adding *“and companies’ instruments”*) and expanding that section related to consumers.

In the first part of chapter 2, the Author begins Her presentation with the issue of consumer insights, behavior, and then underlines the aspects of national culture (the concepts of Hofstede's, Schwarz, among others, are presented). The next sub-chapters concentrate on the companies’ strategies associated with brand, price, products, CRM, etc. involved in the building of the competitive advantage. It can be evaluated as a standard study presenting these issues in a general manner.

Chapter number 3 titled "*Conditions for conducting business activity in Bangladesh with particular emphasis on the FMCG sector*" is a very important part of the dissertation's structure with regard to the main topic and purposes. The Author presents general facts (geographical, demographical, infrastructural, institutional, economic and cultural) about Bangladesh which form the basis for further considerations and empirical research. There are many differentiated sources used in this chapter, e.g. reports, statistical databases and others, which enrich the content. The content offered in the sub-chapter 3.3. titled "The cultural values of Bangladesh" does not meet reader's expectations, as the Author presents cultural values of Bangladeshi only on the basis of Hofstede's dimensions. In my opinion, "in the light of Hofstede's dimensions" should be added to the overall title or the content should be expanded. This analysis should be deepened because the purpose and research hypotheses concern cultural values of Bangladeshi consumers.

An important part of the Chapter 3 relates to FMCG sector in general and with reference to Bangladeshi market. The Author used some statistical data regarding the significance of this sector due to the population growth etc. The issues which are not pointed out in this chapter are related to the strategies used by foreign FMCG companies that operate in Bangladesh and are presented by the Author on page 69. In my opinion, this would be relevant information regarding hypothesis 3.

Chapter number 4 titled "*Methodology of the dissertation*" contains the description of empirical research methodology starting from epistemology and ontology of the research process. Then, the research procedure is presented based on the onion concept in general (sub-chapter 4.1.), and also refers to the study conducted by the Author of the dissertation (sub-chapter 4.2.). It shows in a very transparent way the process that was applied. In my opinion, such a presentation provides a very good background for the research conducted and constitutes one of the strengths of the reviewed dissertation. Nevertheless, with regard to this methodological chapter, I have several remarks outlined below:

- The Author uses interchangeably different names of the research method applied in the dissertation. On the same page (p. 80) we can read that a "face-to-face questionnaire" was conducted, followed by interviews, and then "quantitative survey". It can be perceived as an improper way of naming the research methods. In fact, surveys and interviews belong to different groups of research methods and have specific characteristics and grounds for their use. A questionnaire is an

instrument for implementing a specific method (interview or survey), but a questionnaire is not a research method.

- The Author states that *"The sample reflected the age and gender statistics of the capital, Dhaka, according to the nationwide population marginal distribution of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics"* (p. 80). The results are thus representative for Dhaka, not *"a representative view of the already existing Bangladeshi customer"* (p. 80), which was mentioned in a few paragraphs above. How to interpret this way of explanation provided by the Author?
- The hypotheses are well designed (not presented in Chapter 4), but they are not supported by the empirical sources (findings of other authors) of the literature review. The question arises: what were the sources for formulating such hypotheses and not others?

Chapter number 5 titled *"Data results and relevant determinants of building a competitive advantage in Bangladesh"* presents the findings of empirical research divided into parts (sub-chapters) relating to the hypotheses posed in the Introduction. Such structure of the chapter is clear and logical. The Author presents the analysis of data obtained during the primary research conducted amongst Bangladeshi consumers. To achieve this, the Author used statistical methods which helped Her to test the research hypotheses formulated earlier. Considering the relations depicted in the hypotheses and the scales used in the measurement instrument, the statistical methods used should be evaluated as correct. The Author used mainly a descriptive, factor analysis, chi quadrat test, and others. The matter that should be corrected is associated with the Author's use of comparisons between Her results and the findings of other authors in certain parts of that chapter. It would be acceptable if the Author used such comparisons for all of Her results and not just for some of them. Generally, such comparisons should be presented in the discussion part of the dissertation. Nevertheless, this part of the dissertation is its strong feature.

In chapter 6 titled *"Analysis of the environment in Bangladesh for building the instruments of competitiveness"*, the Author presents the results of Her study regarding, firstly, the importance of other instruments which can be used to achieve competitive advantage in FMCG sector in Bangladesh (e.g. price, sources of information about products, place, etc.), and secondly, the significance of CRM.

The next part of the dissertation "*Discussion, recommendations, and conclusion for building a competitive advantage in Bangladesh's FMCG sector*" includes elements presented in the title of this chapter. The discussion part consists of the summary of the results achieved by the Author of the dissertation in relation to some other authors. In my opinion, more references to other research and authors should be used for comparison. In the Recommendation section, the Author refers to Her findings and provides some advice for foreign companies. In the Conclusion part, the Author included, firstly, the presentation and verification of the hypotheses, secondly, the presentation and summary of the achievement of the objectives. Next, some limitations of the research are described. This is an important part of the dissertation. In my opinion, one thing that is missing is the contribution to academia (in other words, what is the added value of the results achieved in the dissertation in terms of theoretical foundations).

PhD dissertation is finished with list of references, list of figures, list of tables and appendixes (questionnaire and additional statistical calculations).

Technical and stylistic remarks

As a part of formal notes, it is important to mention that the doctoral thesis has been prepared neatly: the language used is easy to understand, the Author uses terminology used in economics, the research depicted graphically has been presented clearly and it complements the text of the dissertation very well. Nevertheless, I have indicated a few remarks related to the technical and stylistic issues:

- The Author uses many citations in the theoretical chapters while presenting the definitions of other authors. While citing, it would be necessary to add a page number.
- Some tables (e.g. Table 6, p. 98) should be formatted more carefully.
- Some minor spelling and punctuation mistakes can be found in the text, e.g. "second hypotheses" (p. 103) instead of hypothesis.

I consider the reviewed thesis to have a proper total size pertaining to the doctoral thesis. Some of the remarks outlined above are polemical in nature and do not influence a good assessment of the dissertation. The strengths of the dissertation that I listed inside of the review influenced my final evaluation of Mrs. Patricia Orelly's doctoral thesis as positive.

Evaluating the given PhD dissertation through Act on Academic Degree and Academic Title, and Degrees and a Title in the field of Art simultaneously concluding that the dissertation is an original solution to the research problem posed, it needs to be emphasized that:

- the doctoral thesis of Mrs. Patrica Orelly is an original solution to the research problem. It tackles a current and significant issue concerning the determinants influencing the activities of foreign companies in Bangladesh in relation to achieving competitive advantage (the consumer perspective was developed);
- the Author demonstrated Her knowledge of literature and the ability to do primary research, data analysis as well as formulating conclusions. In other words, the Doctoral Student demonstrated Her knowledge in the science discipline of economics and finances as well as the ability to independently carry out scientific work;
- the strongest point of the dissertation is the planned research that the Author did on Her own. The Author has also demonstrated Her ability to carry out statistical analysis using appropriate measuring instruments;
- what also deserves to be emphasized is the formulation of recommendations for companies that want launch their products in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Concluding the review, based on the above-listed deliberations about the reviewed dissertation, I declare that Mrs. Patricia Orelly submitted a dissertation entitled „*Building competitive advantage in Bangladesh’s FMCG sector—the perspective of customers*” that meets all requirements described in the Act on Academic Degree and Academic Title and Degrees and a Title in the field of Art and can be used as the basis of further doctoral procedure (discipline of economics). Therefore, I recommend that the dissertation is admitted to public defense.

Poznań, 18 of June 2021


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