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Reciprocal effect of tourist destinations on the strength of national tourism brands

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The study conducts an experiment about the reciprocal effect in the tourism context.
- Perceptions about tourist destinations affect the national tourism brand.
- The more attractive the destination, the stronger the national tourism brand.
- Previous knowledge about the country does not moderate the reciprocal effect.

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ABSTRACT

The assignment of a brand to a product affects consumer's perceptions not only about the product, but also about the brand itself. The reciprocal effect of the product on its brand can be either positive or negative. Extending the concept of reciprocal effect to a new context, this study analyzed how consumer's perceptions about tourist destinations can affect the national tourism brand. An experiment showed that destinations leading to attitudes that are more positive than the average can strengthen the national tourism brand, while destinations leading to attitudes below the average can weaken it. Brand dilution can happen even when the outcome is effective from the destination's perspective. Because of the reciprocal effect, the determination of public policies in the destination level is usually inefficient from the country's perspective. These results reinforce the need for national brand governance.

1. Introduction

Brands enable products to be considered members of certain mental categories. As such, the properties of these members are judged not only directly, but also by means of inferences made from the characteristics of the category identified by the brand (Boush & Loken, 1991; Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991). Thus, the attitude toward a product identified by the brand is different from the attitude toward an unbranded product (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 1993). However, assigning a brand to a product does not influence consumer's perceptions only regarding the product itself. The assignment of the brand can affect perceptions regarding the brand itself since the image of the brand is the combination of the image of all known products that exhibit the brand's symbols. On a two-way relationship, the assignment of brand X to product Y affects consumer's perceptions about both product Y and brand X. The effect of the branded product on consumer's perceptions regarding the brand itself is known as reciprocal effect (Aaker & Keller, 1990). The reciprocal effect of a brand can be positive or negative. On the one hand, branded products can enhance the brand image, increasing its power to influence consumers positively (Kapferer, 2008; Keller & Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993). However, branded products can also damage the brand, especially when they are associated with negative characteristics or when their images are inconsistent with the original image of the brand (Aaker, 1991; Farquhar, 1989; Keller, 1993).

Several empirical studies presented evidence of the existence and characteristics of the reciprocal effect of products upon their brands. Almost all studies in this field focused their analysis on consumer goods (e.g. Kim, Lavack, & Smith, 2001; Martinez &

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Chernatony, 2004; Pina, Riley, & Lomax, 2013). A few studies addressed the reciprocal effect in the context of country brands by focusing on products of a specific geographical origin (Clifton, 2014; Magnusson, Krishnan, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2014). The only studies on the reciprocal effect related to tourism issues were those developed by Lee and Lockshin (2012) and Campo and Alvarez (2014). However, it seems that no study addressed the reciprocal effect caused by the tourist destination on the national tourism brand.

In a certain perspective, destinations are simply products associated with the tourism brand of their countries. Nevertheless, the destination product is quite different from other products in several aspects. First, a destination is inseparable of its national tourism brand, while most other products could be branded differently than they actually are. Besides, the attribution of the national tourism brand to a destination is unintentional, whereas other products are frequently branded as a result of a managerial strategy. Finally, the destination product comprises a set of components that is larger and more complex than those sets of other products, including different services, places, people and other elements. Therefore, the transposition of concepts, theoretical propositions and empirical evidence about the reciprocal effect to the tourism context may bring out important new questions and conclusions.

Up until now, the reciprocal effect has been studied almost exclusively in the context of brand extensions. The reciprocal effect resulting from changes in objective characteristics or perceptions about a previously branded product has been poorly studied. Three noticeable exceptions are the studies of Lee and Lockshin (2012), Clifton (2014), and Magnusson et al. (2014). This sort of changes is particularly important for the reciprocal effect of the destination on the national tourism brand, since geographic compositions of countries are essentially constant over time. Therefore, the national tourism brand can hardly be extended to new destinations. Conversely, reciprocal effect on the national tourism brand is likely to happen due to consumer's perception shifts about destinations that always belonged to the country. This particularity of the national tourism brand, as compared to other types of brands, provides special interest for the study of reciprocal effects on the tourism context.

Applying the concept of reciprocal effect to the tourism context, the aim of this study is to analyze how the attitude toward the tourist destination affects the strength (i.e. competitiveness [Kapferer, 2008]) of the national tourism brand. This research is expected to be useful to support a number of decisions on the tourism management of destinations and countries. Understanding the reciprocal effect enables a more accurate assessment of costs and benefits of any tourism management strategy by taking into consideration its outcomes not only to the destination, but also to the national tourism brand and, consequently, to other destinations in the same country. Without this sort of consideration, estimates of net benefits arising from destination marketing can be biased from the national perspective. Hence, the reciprocal effect leads to a coordination problem for the national tourism brand administration.

In the following, the reciprocal effect is discussed briefly, first from a broad perspective, and then in the tourism context. In section four, theoretical propositions that attempt to explain this effect in the tourism context are presented. Some of these hypotheses are tested in an experiment reported in section four. Finally, conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future work are presented.

2. Reciprocal effect on brands

Several terms have been used in the literature to denote how the assignment of a brand to a product affects the brand, including *reciprocal effect* (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Lane & Jacobson, 1997; Park et al., 1991; Swaminathan, 2003), *spillover effect* (Knapp, Hennig-Thurau, & Mathys, 2014; Magnusson et al., 2014; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Sullivan, 1990), *reciprocal spillover effect* (Balachander & Ghose, 2003), *feedback effect* (Ahluwalia & Gürhan-Canli, 2000; Thorbjørnsen, 2005; Völckner, Sattler, & Kaufmann, 2008), *feedback spillover effect* (Pina et al., 2013) and *reversed effect* (Lee & Lockshin, 2012). Aaker and Keller (1990, p. 40) defined *reciprocal effect* as “the impact of the extension on the original brand”. Sullivan (1990, p. 309) explain that “spillovers occur when information about one product affects the demand for other products with the same brand name”. Ahluwalia and Gürhan-Canli (2000) used *feedback effects* to designate dilution or enhancement of the brand family caused by the branded product. In the present study, the oldest and apparently prevalent term *reciprocal effect* was preferred. *Reciprocal* indicates that the effect of the product on the brand is the counterpart of the usual effect of the brand on the product. Fig. 1 provides a simple and representative graphical definition of the reciprocal effect.

In theoretical terms, the reciprocal effect can be explained from the perspective of brands as signs that enable product categorization (Bless & Greifeneder, 2009; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Gnoth, 2007; Kapferer, 2008; Tsao, Berthon, Pitt, & Parent, 2011). The theory of categorization (Rosch, 1983) explain that the characteristics of the members of a category are summarized by its prototype. Hence, the image of the brand corresponds to the image of the prototype of the category of branded products. According the theory, the definition of prototype features departs from some measure of central tendency of the characteristics of all known members of the category (Barsalou, 1985; Rosch, 1983; Smith, Osherson, Rips, & Keane, 1988).

Inferences about characteristics of members of the category are derived from the characteristics of the prototype (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kapferer, 2008; Tsao et al., 2011). Making inferences from symbols that enable product categorization is the core mechanism of the brand effect. On the other hand, perception shifts about an object can reshape its category's prototype. Therefore, the reciprocal effect on brands can be explained as a particular case of the inductive process of prototype formation. When there is a shift in the perception about a branded product, the image of the brand prototype is adjusted, leading to distinct inferences about other branded products.

Although the study by Romeo (1991) was not successful in verifying the occurrence of the reciprocal effect, most studies since Keller and Aaker (1992) were able to identify such effect. Different studies have shown that low quality brand extensions have a negative reciprocal effect on the strength of the brand (Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 1998; Kim et al., 2001; Lane & Jacobson, 1997; Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997; Völckner et al., 2008). Reciprocal effects can reach not only the brand as a whole, but also each of its assets individually. In this regard, Morrin (1999) found that brand awareness is magnified by consumer exposure to advertising of the brand extension. Loken and John (1993) and John, Loken, and Joiner (1998) showed that negative information about specific features of the brand extension can undermine specific aspects of brand image. Keller and Aaker (1992) and Dacin and Smith (1994) indicated that brand extension increases the likelihood of success of subsequent extensions. Discrepancies between

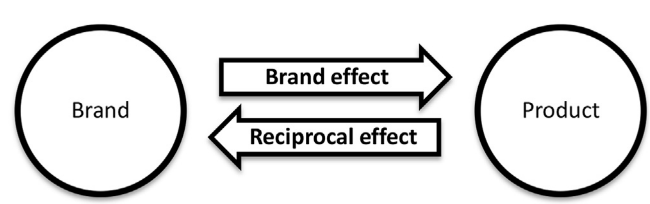

Fig. 1. Brand effect and reciprocal effect.