

THE INFLUENCE OF COUNTRY AND BRAND IMAGE ON THE EVALUATION OF FOREIGN PRODUCTS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF THE NATIONALITY OF THE CONSUMER

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar la relación bidireccional o no recursiva entre la imagen del país and la evaluación del producto. Nuestro objetivo es contribuir al debate sobre la dirección causal entre estos conceptos que existe en la literatura. Además, se confirma el papel mediador de la imagen de marca and su contribución a la relación entre la imagen del país del país and la evaluación del producto. Con el fin de contrastar las hipótesis propuestas, los datos de tres grupos de consumidores se compilan mediante una encuesta en un hipermercado simulado. Los resultados confirman la relación no recursiva entre la imagen del país and la evaluación del producto, sin embargo, ni el papel mediador de la imagen de marca es el mismo para ambas direcciones de la relación antes mencionada ni para los diferentes grupos de consumidores en cuestión

Palabras clave:

Imagen del país, evaluación del producto, imagen de marca, comparaciones multigrupo

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to analyze the bidirectional or non-recursive relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product. Our aim is contributing to the debate about the causal direction between these concepts that exists in the literature. Additionally, the mediating role of brand image and its contribution to the relation between the country image of the country and the evaluation of the product is confirmed. To contrast the proposed hypotheses, data of three groups of consumers is compiled by means of a survey in a simulated hypermarket. Results confirm the non-recursive relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product, however neither the mediating role of brand image is the same for both directions of the relation nor for the different groups of consumers in question.

Keywords:

Image of the country, evaluation of the product, brand image, multigroup comparisons

1. Introducción

This research is focused on two objectives related to the field of international marketing. The first one is to determine the bidirectional relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product, following, on one hand, the research by Lee et al. (2016) and proposing the review of the inverse effect as well, in which favorable beliefs regarding a product can improve the perception of the country of origin of the product.

The theoretical basis is established by the Associative Network Theory and the Theory of Categorization, which suggests that consumers create their perceptions and evaluations based on accumulated memories. This diagram or network is considered as an organized cognitive association that connects a series of concepts or categories of objects because of the limits in the short-term memory capacity (Koubaa et al., 2015). In general, the image of the country refers to general aspects, such as perceptions, beliefs, feelings and intentions that people have about a country (Martín and Eroglu, 1993). Therefore, this theory allows explaining how countries and products are associated (for example, exists the general view that Switzerland is an excellent chocolate producer). This occurs according to the level of knowledge of consumers about the attributes of a foreign product, employing the conditions of the country of origin to evaluate the products and brands and being able to infer the quality of their attributes.

Johansson (1989) suggests that consumers use the image of the country to summarize the information of the attributes of the product and proposes that the image of the country depends on affective processes and the consumer's behavioral intentions, as well as subsequent studies of Villanueva and Papadopoulos (2003) do. Thus, the preference toward a product can depend on the feelings concerning the country that produces it.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, Lee et al. (2016) suggest that trade expansion at the global level causes that many consumers have experiences with foreign products without being familiar with the country of origin of the products, exposing the existence of an inverse effect to the one proposed previously: the evaluation of the product would affect the image of the country (Lee and Lockshin, 2012; Magnusson et al., 2014).

The second objective is to determine the effect of the three levels of the country's image (cognitive, conative and affective levels) in the evaluation of a product. These levels have been considered individually in previous research (Brodie and Benson-Rea, 2016).

Finally, brand image will be analyzed as a possible mediator of the possible bi-directional relationship between country image and product image because previous studies have proved its effect on product evaluation as well as on country image; and the nationality of the consumer will be considered as a control variable. Therefore, considering the two-directional evidence in the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product in previous works, this article is organized as follows: first, a literature review about the existing relations between the image of the country, evaluation of the product, brand image and nationality of consumers is carried out with the Associative Network Theory and the Theory of Categorization as reference frameworks. In second place, the conceptual model is presented and the relations between the constructs of the proposed model are explained. Subsequently, the methodology taken into consideration is presented, as well as the results obtained. Finally, the main conclusions of the study are exposed.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Bidirectional relation between the evaluation of the product and the image of the count

The evaluation of the product refers to the consumer's perception of a product based on its variability and the comparison between its benefits and acquisition cost, analyzing the level of preference, satisfaction and use of the product (Chen et al., 2014; Etkin and Sela, 2016).

In the case of the products that come from different contexts than the ones consumers belong to, the level of preference, satisfaction with the product and its use that these consumers dispose of as a reference may be limited, thus consumers use the image of the country of origin of the product to recognize the condition of the attributes of the product.

In accordance with the associative network theory, literature about the image of the country of origin can be classified into three categories: focused on the cognitive level, the conative level and the affective level. The cognitive level (Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009) is associated with the generation of expectations of a product created by the available information, stereotypes of the country and reputation built over time (for example, as we have previously mentioned, the image of Switzerland as a chocolate producer). Another level refers to the connotation of ethnocentrism. This suggests that even with a tendency of demanding a product, it is possible that consumers feel inhibited since it comes from a foreign country, by reasons such as patriotism and nationalism (Balabanis et al., 2001). A third group of studies proposes that consumers create positive or negative reactions when finding products of a country of origin, which has an influence on the possibility of purchase (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999).

Papadopoulos et al. (1988) incorporate different measures of the country's image in their study, attempting to analyze the relation between the beliefs of countries, beliefs of the products, familiarity, evaluation of the product and willingness to purchase. They proposed that perceptions of consumers about the country of origin of a product comprise three components (Papadopoulos et al., 1988; La roche et al., 2005):

- A cognitive component that includes the beliefs of consumers about industrial development and technological progress of the country.
- An affective component that describes the emotional response of consumers to people of the countries.
- A conative component that describes the desired level of interaction of consumers with the supply country.

Other authors (Ittersum et al., 2003; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Wang et al., 2012) propose two dimensions of the country's image: a cognitive dimension, defined by the beliefs about the characteristics of the country and its people; and an affective dimension, defined by the feelings and emotions about a country. These authors establish that the cognitive and affective dimensions can have an influence on the attitude and response of the consumer regarding foreign products.

Martin and Eroglu (1993), on the other hand, define the image of the country as the total of all descriptive, inferential beliefs and information related that an individual has about a country, and that are measured by means of three dimensions: political system, economic level and technological level. However, Carneiro and Faira (2016) point out that it is not an appropriate scale for demonstrating the influence of the country's image in aspects such as the perceived quality of foreign products, taking into consideration that some of the dimensions do not always affect perceptions about the quality of the product. Similarly, Costa et al. (2016) measure the image of the country in terms of the cognitive component, including economic

development, technological level, level of political maturity, demographic, social, cultural and geographic characteristics, and population aspects such as the education level, standard of living, and labor competitiveness, among others.

Consequently, despite of the fact that there are studies that present difficulties to explain the influence of the image of the country of origin of certain products, when measuring the general image of the country, instead of doing it by means of the beliefs of consumers in regards to the suitability of the country (van Ittersum et al., 2003; Wang and Lamb, 1983; Schooler et al., 1987), they show that factors such as the level of economic development and political situation of a country (aspects included in the construct of the image of the country used in this research) have a significant influence on the evaluation of a product. In this sense, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) had already suggested that the image of the country seems to have an influence of the evaluation carried out by consumers about the quality of the product, the risk and probability of purchase, among other variables. Following this line, previous research (Van Ittersum et al., 2003; Costa et al., 2016; Smaoui et al., 2016) has already suggested that a positive effect of the country's image is present in the evaluation of the product, reason by which, the following is proposed as the first hypothesis in this study:

Hypothesis 1: A favorable image of the country has a positive influence on the evaluation of the product of the country.

It is worth mentioning that some empirical studies about the image of the country have not considered its multidimensionality to operationalize the construct (Han, 1989; Knight and Calantone, 2000). In fact, there are studies that have measured the image of the country by means of the product, instead of using the own measures of the country (Han, 1989).

The relation between the favorable evaluation of a product and the image of a country is based on literature about the consumer's behavior that has explored the ways in which these perceive products and services. The Theory of Categorization is recognized by describing perceptions and evaluations of consumers under the assumption that different classifications of a product are created from an infinite number of incentives (Gutman, 1982). Hence, facing the existence of a limited memory and the presence of different external incentives, individuals divide these incentives into categories to obtain the most useful information with the least possible effort.

These categories that are accumulated in the memory, guide the consumer in the evaluation of a product, considering that these are accumulated in the memory leading to the taking of a favorable or unfavorable decision regarding the product (Koubaa et al., 2015; Etkin and Sela, 2016). For instance, the evaluation of a product as chocolate can be based on the price or other categories of a similar product consumed in the past. Distinct from other processes based on rules (such as the image of the country to evaluate a product), in this case, it can be assumed that there is a low memory capacity, since it is based on the similarity of attributes (Hoffmann et al, 2014). Therefore, the evaluation of a product refers to the perception that a consumer has about a product based on its variability and of the comparison between its benefits and acquisition cost, analyzing the level of preference, satisfaction and use of the product (Chen et al., 2014; Etkin and Sela, 2016).

In this sense, Magnusson et al. (2014) and Koubaa et al. (2015) also suggest that an inverse effect between the image of the country and the evaluation of a product, in which consumers whose beliefs in the products are favorable, report a better perception of the image of the country of the product (in contrast to the studies that mention the influence of the country's image on perceptions of the products). According to Samiee et al. (2005), once consumers become experts of a product, can evaluate it objectively, depending less on the image of the

country for its evaluation and instead, beliefs founded on the product affect the concept of a positive image of the country of origin.

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: A favorable evaluation of a product has a positive influence on the image of country from where the product comes from.

2.2. The mediating role of brand image

Brand is considered as an important marketing tool to differentiate products and increase their value; for this reason, it has been established as an intangible asset of organizations that allows the achievement of competitive advantages (Chun and Davies, 2003). By means of the brand, consumers can carry out a faster evaluation of the product considering it gathers the information related to the product's reputation, among other aspects (Glazer, 1985).

Acknowledging that the brand is comprised by different dimensions, Aaker (1991) refers to intangible aspects such as symbols, slogans, identity, loyalty, knowledge and perceived quality. On its part, Hankinson (2005) recognizes three components: brand associations, brand images and symbols and logos.

Brand image is developed in the mind of the consumer through the impact that advertisement, promotion, public relationships and the encounter of the consumer with the product creates (Suhartanto and Kandampully, 2003). Thus, brand image is an important element for organizations due to its capacity to exert influence on the costumer's perception toward the products, affecting their purchase decision (Lahap et al., 2016). Saleem and Raja (2014) suggest that image reflects the brand effect in the memory of consumers (for this reason, what comes to the mind of consumers when they visualize the brand of a product is what is considered). Consumers tend to have different impressions and experiences when being in contact with a product and this leads to perceiving different images (Mohajerani and Miremadi, 2012). Therefore, organizations are aware that their profitability is partly due to the creation of a strong image of their products, which leads to the client's loyalty (Mirzaee et al., 2013).

In fact, different research has studied the influence of brand image on the evaluation of the product (Cordell, 1993; Ahmed and D'Astous, 1995; Diamantopoulos et al., 2011). These studies point out that brand image has a direct effect on the evaluation of the product. The strength of a product is partly the result of brand image (Thakor and Katsanis, 1997); in this sense, the positive or negative perception of a consumer toward a brand may affect his/her perception of different attributes of the product.

On the other hand, based on the Theory of Categorization, the influence of the evaluation of a product on brand image can be proposed in as much as given the existence of limited memory, consumers tend to keep important information of the products purchased previously and remembering some of the attributes (price, quality, among others), allowing to have an influence on the brand image of products (Lajos et al., 2009). Subsequently, based on a brand image, this aspect allows to have an influence on the image of the country, in as much as, knowing a brand previously helps to improve the perception of the country where it was produced, associated with the evaluation of the product and the brand. Anholt (2006) stated that some brand images such as Samsung can help to build a positive image of the country based on the belief or associations of attributes of this product.

Therefore, in accordance with the previously exposed, the following situations could appear: 1) the consumer holds the image of a brand without knowing the country of origin of the brand; 2) the consumer holds both, the image of the brand and of the product of the country of

origin; 3) the consumer evaluates a product (one similar) and allows him to create a brand image. In the first case, and as mentioned previously, we would be facing the direct effect of brand image on the evaluation of the product. In the second case, the previously established brand image may cause that the effect of the country's image on the evaluation of the product is produced in two ways: a direct effect and an indirect effect, by means of brand image; this last effect could even be higher than the first one (González and Casilda, 2002). In the third case, brand image can cause that the effect of the evaluation of the product on the country's image is produced directly or that also manages to mediate in a partial way.

Thus, this argument leads us to propose the mediating effect of brand image in the relation between the image associated to the country and the evaluation that consumers carry out of the product. Therefore, in this research we establish the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3a: Brand image has a mediating effect on the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product.

Hypothesis 3b: Brand image has a mediating effect on the relation between the evaluation of the product and the image of the country.

2.3. Moderating effect of the nationality of the consumer

Finally, some studies have researched whether the evaluation of the products can vary according to the nationality of consumers. Amine and Shin (2002) state that consumers present favoritisms for certain products based on the proximity and knowledge of the country of origin of the products, and empirically demonstrate that the disposition to purchase a foreign product varies according to the nationality of the consumer.

Costa et al. (2016) argue that consumers from developing countries tend to emphasize more on the images of the countries in comparison to consumers of developed countries. This is because several developing countries impose strong restrictions to imports; therefore, their consumers cannot obtain the same experience or familiarity with foreign products than consumers of developed countries. Hsieh (2004) also found evidence in favor of the influence of the consumer's nationality on the magnitude of the effect of the image of the country on the evaluation of the product, arguing that in developed countries there is greater availability of information about the attributes of the products, and there is usually a greater differentiation of products, in relation to less developed countries. In this sense, the relation between a favorable image of the country and the product is stronger in developed markets and weaker in more developed markets.

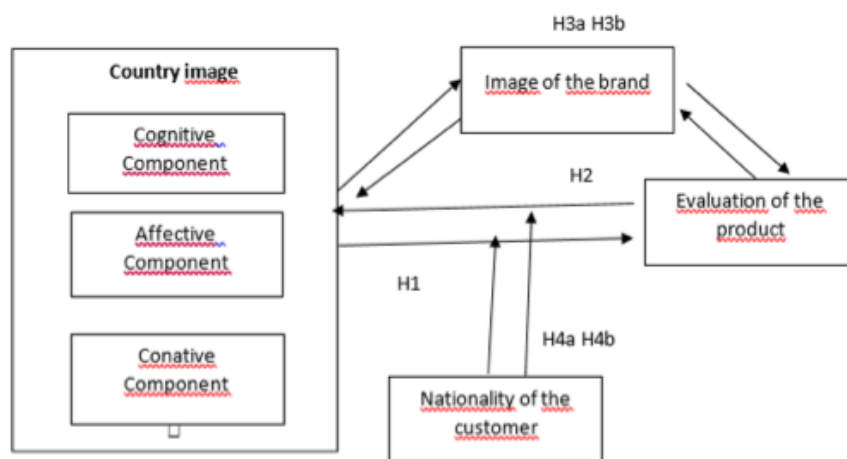
Therefore, regarding the moderating role of the nationality of the consumer on the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of a product, it can be established that when comparing two products with similar characteristics produced in different countries, differences in the perception of image of the aforementioned countries tend to produce a greater difference in the evaluation of the product in the case of consumers of developed countries in relation to consumers of developing countries (Hsieh, 2004; Costa et al., 2016). Considering these arguments, the following hypothesis is established:

Hypothesis 4a: The influence of the favorable image of the country on the evaluation of its products is stronger among consumers from developed countries than among consumers from developing countries.

Hypothesis 4b: The influence of the evaluation of products on the favorable image of the country is stronger among consumers from developed countries than among consumers from developing countries.

Therefore, a model that analyzes the bidirectional relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product is proposed in this study. The image of the country is measured under the proposed dimensions by Papadopoulos et al. (1990). At the same time, the influence of brand image as a mediating variable between the country's image and the evaluation of the product is analyzed; in such way, it is assumed that the image of the country influences brand image (Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002), and this also has an effect on the evaluation of the product. Likewise, the evaluation of the product affects the brand image, and this image has an impact on the image of the country of origin of the product. Additionally, a moderating role of the nationality of the consumer in the bidirectional relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product to establish whether the nationality of the consumer can modify the importance of the effect is proposed (See Graph 1).

FIGURA 1
Proposed Model



3. Methodology

This work employs 3 groups of consumers from different origins (Colombia, Switzerland and The United States) that must choose between chocolates by means of a tasting test (each test includes a product of each nationality).

The choice of consumers from Switzerland, The United States and Colombia is associated to the need to carry out comparative analyses between study objects that allow gathering aspects of diversity and similarity (Malhotra, et al., 1996; Sintonen, et al., 2016). In the case of this study, diversity is achieved since consumers belong to developed countries (The United States and Switzerland) vs developing country (Colombia), and considering different geographic and cultural parameters (North America, South America and Europe). Regarding similarity, all surveyed ones are related to the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. As subsequently pointed out, this institution has a laboratory that simulates a market, for which the impact of the purchase context on the evaluation of the product can be controlled.

Furthermore, in theoretical terms, the choice of these three countries is explained by the need to gather the three views of the analyses of the country effect (Cognitive, Conative and Affective). The cognitive level is approached by means of the presence of Swiss consumers. The affective level is reflected in consumers of The United States, who are highly prone to consume products of their same country due to affection feelings above other characteristics. Lastly, the presence of Colombian consumers is justified since they possess a negative

ethnocentrism in as much as they prefer to consume imported products above their own local products.

3.1. Choice of the product

The choice of chocolate as a product is justified since it is included in the category of fast moving consumption goods and it is consumed regardless of the gender, age and socio-economic level; allowing us to assume that knowledge about the product is homogeneous in the population (Rosenbloom and Haefner, 2009). To this justification, we must add that the effect of the country of origin plays a key role in the purchase and consumption decisions of this type of product (Ozretic-Dosen, Skare and Krupta, 2007). Finally, it is a product whose attributes can be compared from a country to another one and classifies the effects of the country of origin: quality (flavor), brand (product image), price, line of products (variety of flavors) and recognition (image of the country) (Ozretic-Dosen, Skare and Krupta, 2007).

3.2. Sample and data collection

Data collection was carried out in September 2016 at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, in as much as, as mentioned previously, this institution has a laboratory that simulates a supermarket. This laboratory has three spaces: market, distribution center (90 m²) and a corner shop (35 m²). The supermarket has two cash registers, closed-circuit television, assortment of 5 categories of products (food, personal hygiene, household, medication and pets).

This simulated supermarket was equipped with chocolates from the three countries of study, for consumers to carry out a process of observation, chocolate tasting of different nationalities (Swiss, American and Colombian) and subsequently, participants of the tasting are asked to answer a questionnaire. Everyone must taste a chocolate from each country to establish comparative parameters. The tasting order of the products was balanced to avoid selection biases. All participants mentioned being regular chocolate consumers. Groups of 36 participants per country were selected, to have balanced groups.

The selected sample is representative with the population standards of gender, age and education level of the participating countries in the sample. In the case of Swiss participants, 51% are women and 48% are men, with an education level of more than 70% in higher levels of education, and with an age average of 40 years old.

Measures

This study employs three reflective scales. According to Diamantopoulos (1999), this type of scales is the most used in the field of international marketing, where the observed variables are demonstrations of the constructs. Therefore, the scales used are: country image, evaluation of the product and brand image. Country image is a second-order multidimensional construct and the evaluation of the product and brand image are one-dimensional constructs.

As mentioned previously, this study is based on the construct established by Papadopoulos et al. (1988) to determine the effect of the country image on the evaluation of the product. The selection of this construct is justified for considering the three-dimensionality of the country image considering beliefs about countries (cognitive component), the affective responses of consumers with the population of the country (affective component) and the desired interaction with the country's population (conative component).

In addition to this, according to Koubaa et al. (2015), different studies have demonstrated that this construct is superior than others in terms of indexes of adjustment and validity, for being an appropriate and precise concept, where the main effects of the country of origin are extracted (Souiden et al., 2011; Dagger and Raciti, 2011). The evaluation of the product is

measured with the proposed scale by Etkin and Sela (2016) and brand image uses the measure of Low and Lamb (2000). These scales are translated to Spanish but keeping the meaning of the original scale.

4. Analysis and Results

The model to conduct is a model of non-recursive structural equations. Although this type of model is not commonly used in the field of marketing and business, it achieves diffusion in the psychology analysis (Hung-Bin et al, 2016; Mathieu, 1991; Hoffmann, 1998; Chang et al., 2007), considering it recognizes what amount of relations can a bidirectional relation have, and specially, those associated to human behaviors.

4.1. Evaluation of the measurement model

Data for both the global sample and the different groups show appropriate reliability measures. The SCR Composite Reliability Indexes are higher than 0,6 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), and the average variance extracted (AVE) is superior than 0,5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Likewise, all the loadings correspond to its hypothetical factors and estimations are significant, given that the t-value presents high values, which presents evidence of convergent validity (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

Additionally, based on Fornell and Larcker (1981) the discriminant validity for both the general model and the different consumer groups is analyzed, from analyzing if the square root of the AVE in each construct exceeds the correlation of the variance shared between the construct. Table 3 allows us to conclude that values in the diagonal are higher than the correlations between constructs, which means that the existence of discriminant validity is demonstrated.

4.2. Information of the structural model

The adjustment of the General model is satisfactory (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The RMSEA is lower than 0,05 and the measures of incremental adjustment (CFI, NNFI) are higher than 0,9. The GFI does not exceed the threshold of 0,90; however, the fact that the NNFI and IFI are incremental adjustment indexes, are considered better adjustment indexes in relation to the GFI, which is an index of absolute value (Hu and Bentler, 1995).

The analysis of results of the structural model allow to confirm Hypothesis 1, in which the favorable image of the country has a positive influence on the evaluation of the product is proposed ($\gamma_{11} = .75$; $p < 0,01$). In same way, concerning Hypothesis 2, the significance of the obtained coefficient allows to point out a direct relation from the evaluation of the product to the image of the country. On the other hand, to test Hypothesis 3a and 3b related to mediation effect, we proceeded following three steps: first, the model without mediation is estimated in order to confirm its adjustment measures. Subsequently, the construct brand image is included in the model to mediate the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product. Finally, the adjustments and contribution of mediation to the model are analyzed. This process is similar when the construct brand image mediates the relation between evaluation of product and image of country.

Attending the results obtained, Hypothesis 3a about the mediation of brand image in the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product is confirmed but partial mediation was found. On the other hand, Hypothesis 3b about the mediation of brand image in the relation between the evaluation of the product and image of the country can't be accepted.

4.3. Results of the Multi-group model

To carry out the multi-group model, the invariance of the measurement model is initially analyzed. Therefore, comparative models are specified to confirm whether there is equivalence in the factor structure based on the measurement model. In this sense, in first place, the adjustments of the less restricted model are analyzed and then compared to the following models until reaching the restricted model that supposes the parameters of the measurement model are equal for all the groups (Wideman et al , 2010 ; Hair, 2014). It is important to highlight that to carry out tests of invariability of the sample.

To confirm Hypotheses 4a and 4b, a multi-group analysis is proposed to compare the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of its products between developed and developing countries.

Table 5 shows the results of the estimation of the multi-group model dividing the sample into consumers of three nationalities.

TABLE 5.
Structural Model

Relations in the model	Multigroup Structural Analysis							
	Colombians			Swiss		Americans		Test of differences X ²
	Parameter	Estimated Coefficient	t-value	Estimated Coefficient	t-value	Estimated Coefficient	t-value	
IC -> EP	β_{31}	0,75	9,04***	0,59	4,69***	0,80	7,46***	E > C > S
EP -> IC	β_{13}	0,19	1,86	0,52	5,10***	0,44	5,41***	S > E > C
IC -> IB	β_{21}	0,27	4,70***	0,26	2,70***	0,27	3,88***	C = S = E
IB -> EP	β_{32}	0,26	3,54***	0,49	7,74***	0,30	2,96***	S > E > C
EP -> IB	β_{23}	0,121	1,781	0,20	1,94*	0,12	1,75	S > E = C
IB -> IC	β_{12}	0,148	1,54	0,19	1,91*	0,10	1,36	S > E = C
		X ² =745.84						
		GFI=.903						
		RMSEA=0,0562						

Source: authors

In the model of Swiss consumers, all relations are positive. The reciprocal relation between the country's image and the evaluation of the product is significant, but it is the relation between the evaluation of the product towards the image of the country ($\beta = .52$ $p < .001$) where Swiss present the highest coefficient in comparison to the other two groups (S > E > C); while in the inverse relation (IC towards EP) this group presents the lowest coefficient (E > C > S). This finding indicates that the evaluation of the product of the Swiss people, from a country with a high tradition of producing chocolate, is more important than the image associated to the country, which means that the consumption of this product is based on quality rather than in the image of the country. As the evaluation of the product has a greater impact on the image of the country than the latter on the evaluation of the product, we can confirm that for consumers from a country with a very good image as chocolate producers it is more relevant the product that the image of the place of origin of the product.

Additionally, the mediating role of brand image in the relation between the country's image and the evaluation of the product is highlighted, achieving to improve the explained variance in more than 3 percentage points (R² from 0.77 a 0.80) with significant values in the relation between the image of the country and brand image ($\beta = .26$ $p < .001$) and between brand image and the evaluation of the product ($\beta = .49$ $p < .001$) as well as between the evaluation of the product and brand image ($\beta = .20$ $p < .1$) and between brand image and image of the

country ($\beta = .19$ $p < .1$) . This result allows us to conclude that the previous image of Swiss chocolate brands causes that the consumer reports a higher evaluation of the product and a higher image of the country of origin of the product.

The reciprocal relation between the country's image and the evaluation of the product is also achieved in the group of Americans. As we can see the relation image of the country towards the evaluation of the product present the highest coefficient in comparison to the other 2 groups, which means that the country of origin of the product has a clear impact on the product evaluation. In addition to this, brand image also mediates the relation image of the country and evaluation of the product, achieving to improve the explained variance in more than 4 percentage points (R^2 from .70 a .748) with significant values in the relation between the country's image and brand image ($\beta = .27$ $p < .001$) and between brand image and evaluation of the product ($\beta = .3$ $p < .05$). However, for this group of consumers, the mediating role of the brand image in the relation between evaluation for product and image of country is not fulfilled.

Finally, for the case of Colombian consumers, the relation to highlight is the one of the country's image towards the evaluation of the product because the opposite direction is not significant. This means that the consumers from Colombia highlight the existence of a previously formed image of a country, which allows to have a better perception of the product. The mediating role of brand image is only observed on the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product, achieving to improve the explained variance in more than 6 percentage points (R^2 from .70 a .765) with significant values in the relation between the country's image and brand image ($\beta = .27$ $p < .05$) and between brand image and the evaluation of the product ($\beta = .26$ $p < .05$).

5. Conclusiones

This article has analyzed the bidirectional relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product; furthermore, it proposes a mediating effect of brand image in these relations. Likewise, the multigroup structure sheds light on the differences in the moment of evaluating a product by consumers of three highly different countries

Findings reveal the existence of the reciprocal relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of a product. This is a contribution regarding previous studies that had just considered one of the directions in the relationship among these two constructs: some studies had analyzed how the image of the country affected the evaluation of the product (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; van Ittersum et al., 2003; Costa et al., 2016), and others had been focused on how the evaluation of the product influenced on the country's image (Magnusson et al., 2014; Koubaa et al., 2015). This double direction suggests that the country's image has an influence on the evaluation carried out by consumers about the product and, on the other hand, that the evaluation of products causes that consumers build a positive recognition about the country where they were manufactured.

The analysis performed allows us to establish that, in general terms, the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of a product is positive and significant to Swiss, Colombians and Americans. Nevertheless, the inverse relation (the effect of the evaluation of the product on the image of the country) is not significant to Colombians, but it is in the other two groups, with a higher impact in the Swiss group.

These differences in the relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product allow to conclude that the economic condition of the country (developed country and developing country) could be conclusive in order to establish the relevance directions of the aforementioned relations since the relation between the evaluation of the product and the

country's image is predominant for Swiss consumer (developed country), but the inverse relation is present in both The United States and Colombia (developed country and developing country). This evidence goes in line with the proposal by Godey et al (2012), who consider that the perception of poverty or the adverse conditions to production can create effects on the evaluation of the products and brands, since the image of the country affects the dimensions associated to the status and can produce an idea of the difficulties or notions of production (lack of quality controls, type of technology, durability, among others). If the place of origin of a product is a developed country, its image can affect the product's brand image and the purchase decision (Eng e t al., 2010), even when little about the brand or country is known.

For Swiss consumers, the relation between the evaluation of the product and the image of the country predominates over its inverse relation. Therefore, this finding indicates that this group of consumers places less value to production expectations formed from stereotypes of the country, reputation, and tend to relate the country image with their evaluation of the products. As suggested by Samiee et al (2005), the characteristics of the product are positioned above the image of the country, since they are expert consumers.

Contrarily, for the American and Colombian consumers the image of the country tends to guide their products' assessments. In this case, in coherence with the proposal by Suri and Thakor (2013), the made in strategy tends to be more effective due to the positive associations that the consumer can make in the moment of evaluating the product. Therefore, this finding stresses out the importance of the Associative Network Theory to explain the behavior of some consumers.

On the other hand, the mediation effect of brand image in the bi-directional relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product has been also analyzed in the three groups of consumers. The mediation of brand image in both directions becomes relevant in the Swiss group, while for Americans and Colombians the mediation of brand image is observed in just one of the suggested directions (from image country to product evaluation). This finding supports Gonzalez and Casilda (2002), who emphasize that when consumers know the product's brand previously, they already have a previous image of the product, so the effect of the image of the country on the evaluation of the product will be above than the one achieved by the direct effect.

Finally, the verification of the existence of a bidirectional relation between the image of the country and the evaluation of the product is a contribution to the academy, in as much as in literature it has been partially analyzed and the type of influence between these two concepts was not conclusive. Additionally, a contribution to advancing in the explanation of the Associative Network Theory is achieved with this work, considering the confirmation that some consumers evaluate a product from previous associations and knowledge about the countries of origin of the product.

As contributions to directors, this work establishes that different business and investment strategies must be proposed to achieve the consolidation of a strong brand image that creates high recall to consumers as a way to affect the possible perceptions of their products. This will allow better possibilities of mobilization and presence of the products in international markets. Likewise, businessmen must gather efforts with the government entities to help creating a country image from showing the positive aspects of both the socio-economic conditions and of products or sectors of high quality that will generate recall within consumers of different countries.

5.1. Limitations and Future lines of Research

As limitations of this study, it can be established that the model is cross-sectional and therefore, does not allow to conclude about long-term effects of the different constructs. Additionally, the authors recognize as a limitation the context of data recollection since the sampling takes place within the facilities of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, but considering that participants were submitted to processes of tasting and visualization of the products, we must had products exhibited in the existing gondolas of the University's facilities. Therefore, the registered sample size is also recognized as another limitation, but considering the magnitude of the model, the conditions of the experiment, the achievement of the groups of consumers from different countries and the objectives of the research, it becomes relevant.

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