



Does the country image condition our purchases? A cluster-analysis from the citizen perspective

José Antonio Pedraza-Rodríguez

University of Cordoba, Spain.

japedraza@uco.es



María Elizabeth Arteaga-García

University of San Gregorio de Portoviejo, Ecuador.

mearteaga@sangregorio.edu.ec



Julia Margarita Núñez-Tabales

University of Cordoba, Spain.

es2nutaj@uco.es



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study explores how the internal perception of a country's image influences citizens' preferences for domestic brands, especially in an increasingly challenging global context for emerging economies. **Methodology:** Using a structured survey of 823 people and a two-step cluster analysis, four sociodemographic segments were identified, each with distinct patterns in evaluating physical, cultural, emotional, technological, economic, and political aspects. **Results:** The findings show that the emotional dimension (linked to attributes like national pride, sense of belonging, or nostalgia) and the cultural dimension (tied to elements such as national identity, traditions, and customs) have the strongest connection and influence on consumer preferences for domestic brands, especially among lower-income groups. Meanwhile, more economically stable groups value attributes like quality (excellence, reliability, and superiority of national products) and the country's development (modern, stable, innovative, and growing). **Discussion:** These results confirm that a country's image is not uniform and should be approached from a segmented perspective, considering both consumption patterns and identity. **Conclusions:** This study makes an original contribution to the country-branding debate by examining citizens' perceptions, integrating theory, methodology, and socioeconomic impact. The findings are relevant for government strategies in developing national brands, helping create targeted campaigns aligned with each group's values and expectations without undermining corporate strategies.

Keywords: Country image; segmentation; national brand valuation; citizen profiles; Ecuador brand.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the internal perception of Ecuador's country image and its influence on citizens' preferences for national brands, within a global context that is particularly challenging for emerging economies. Studying country image from an internal perspective is crucial for understanding how citizens actively contribute to building and projecting national identity. Rather than focusing solely on international positioning, this research addresses how Ecuadorians' own perceptions affect both the consumption of national brands and the country's internal cohesion (Yousaf & Li, 2015; Dinnie, 2022). In times of global transformations and tensions in trade flows, understanding the relationship between citizenship, national identity, and country branding offers strategic opportunities for governments and businesses seeking to strengthen the country's legitimacy, economic development, and symbolic representation from within (Rojas-Méndez & Khoshnevis, 2023).

Although the literature on country image and country branding has grown significantly in recent decades, most studies have focused on analysis from an external perspective, examining how countries and their products are perceived internationally. In contrast, less attention has been paid to internal perceptions, that is, how citizens themselves shape their view of the country and how this view impacts their behavior as consumers or citizens (Zenker et al., 2017; Govers, 2018). Furthermore, most research has approached nation image from an aggregate perspective, without sufficiently considering the sociodemographic diversity within a single nation. This omission limits the understanding of the factors that truly influence the symbolic construction of the country from within.

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the perception of Ecuador's country image from a segmented, citizen-based perspective. Specifically, it proposes three main objectives: first, to examine how citizens value different dimensions of the country image (physical, cultural, emotional, technological, economic, and political); second, to identify distinct sociodemographic segments based on their assessments of the six dimensions mentioned above; and third, to examine how the different segments influence consumer preferences toward national brands. Furthermore, it aims to compare perceptions according to variables such as age, region, education level, and income, and to provide useful information for designing more segmented

and effective communication and public policy strategies. This approach is particularly relevant for developing countries, where internal contrasts are often more pronounced and where building a strong country brand requires greater alignment between internal identity and external projection (Che-Ha et al., 2016; Raji et al., 2025).

This article contributes to the academic discussion on country image and country branding from at least three key perspectives: it provides empirical evidence on the heterogeneity of perceptions within a national population, it applies advanced statistical techniques such as two-stage cluster analysis to identify segmentation patterns, and it explores how these perceptions influence strategic dimensions such as loyalty, perceived quality, and consumer preferences toward national products. Although this study draws on Social Identity Theory (Stets & Biga, 2003), which argues that people's identity influences their attitudes and behaviors, it also seeks to address an ongoing debate in the literature by answering the question: Do citizens of the same country share a common vision of their nation, or, on the contrary, are there different perceptions depending on the socioeconomic profile of each group?

Based on this theoretical foundation and the proposed approach, the following hypotheses are proposed: 1) the perception of the country's image varies significantly according to the sociodemographic profile of the citizens; 2) there are statistical differences in the assessments of the different dimensions of the country's image among the identified segments; 3) attitudes towards national brands —loyalty, perceived quality and recognition— are associated with the sociodemographic profile; 4) preferences towards emblematic Ecuadorian products are also conditioned by this profile.

The article is organized into five sections. First, the theoretical framework underpinning the study is presented, addressing the concepts of country image, country brand, and sociodemographic segmentation. Second, the methodology employed is described. Next, the main results obtained, both descriptive and inferential, are presented. Subsequently, the findings are discussed in relation to previous literature, and practical implications for the design of public policies and communication strategies are derived. Finally, the conclusions and future lines of research are presented.

2. METHODOLOGY

A country's image and the value of its brand in the domestic market depend on both external and internal factors. The internal perceptions of a country's citizens are fundamental to this process (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2022). These perceptions influence the country's international positioning and the strengthening of its brands within its territory (Lagae, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2025).

In a context of abrupt changes in international trade rules, delving deeper into the strategic management of country branding is increasingly necessary. It is crucial to understand how different sociodemographic groups perceive the country, its culture, its economy, and its national brands (Makgosa & Maswabi, 2025). Internal perceptions influence not only the legitimacy of public policies and consumption decisions but also the coherence of the identity projected abroad (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2025). Given this relevance, it is important to analyze the homogeneity or heterogeneity of these perceptions, which can vary according to variables such as educational level, income, region of residence, or employment status (Oduro et al., 2024; Makgosa & Maswabi, 2025).

This theoretical framework is organized around five key conceptual axes: 1) the dimensions that shape the country's image from an internal perspective, 2) the value of the country brand as perceived by citizens, 3) sociodemographic segmentation using cluster analysis, and 4) the relationship between the identified segments and their respective perceptions of the country. The objective is to ground the importance of considering internal citizen diversity when analyzing the country's image and brand, allowing for the identification of significant perception differences among citizens.

2.1. Image of the country: analysis dimensions

A country's image is defined as the set of perceptions, beliefs, and associations that individuals, whether citizens or foreigners, attribute to a territory (Anholt, 2005; Dinnie, 2022). It is a multidimensional construct that includes both objective and subjective elements (Zeugner-Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Kotler and Gertner (2007) highlight its value as an intangible asset, key to a country's economic, social, and reputational development.

The internal perspective takes on special relevance as citizens become active participants in shaping the country's image, acting as informal ambassadors, particularly on social media (Spielmann & Minton, 2020). Their perception influences social cohesion, domestic consumption, and the country's international projection (Pappu et al., 2007; Zenker et al., 2017; Govers, 2018).

A country's image at the broadest level is constructed from various dimensions that reflect the general perception of the country as a whole. One key dimension is the physical dimension, encompassing the natural environment, landscape, and sustainability policies. These aspects directly influence the perception of a country's environmental attractiveness (García de los Salmones et al., 2022). Another key dimension is the economic dimension, which focuses on a country's level of development, macroeconomic stability, job creation, and competitiveness. These elements strengthen or weaken a country's internal and external image (Yousaf & Li, 2015).

Another fundamental dimension is the technological dimension, which refers to indicators of a country's dynamism and modernity, such as the degree of innovation, digitalization, and adoption of new technologies (Maher & Carter, 2011). The social dimension considers access to health and education services, social cohesion, and equality of opportunity, elements that project an image of well-being and equity (Florek, 2005).

From an institutional perspective, a country's image is influenced by the political dimension, which evaluates the stability, transparency, and quality of government institutions (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). Similarly, the cultural dimension encompasses aspects such as historical heritage, language, traditions, and collective identity. These aspects contribute to a country's distinctiveness and foster a sense of belonging (Akama & Kieta, 2007). Finally, the emotional dimension reflects citizens' affective bond with their country, expressed through feelings of pride, affection, and national commitment (Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Riefler, 2017).

At the micro level, a country's image relates to how its citizens perceive products and brands originating within its borders. Traditionally, this concept has been examined through the country-of-origin effect, which studies how a product's national origin influences consumers' evaluations of it (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). However, in local consumption contexts, other factors come into play, such as national identity, the desire to support the country's economy, and the perceived quality of domestic products. These elements significantly influence purchasing behavior and preferences for local brands (Che-Ha et al., 2016; Thoumrungroje et al., 2024).

2.2. Country branding from a citizen's perspective

A country branding is understood as a comprehensive strategy that combines elements of *marketing*, communication, and national identity, with the aim of projecting a coherent image both domestically and internationally (Anholt, 2005). This symbolic construction not only seeks to position the country in the international arena but also plays a key role in articulating shared values, generating a sense of belonging among citizens.

From a citizen's perspective, the value of country branding can be analyzed through several interrelated dimensions. First, loyalty expresses citizens' emotional commitment to their country and its products, which

can manifest itself in attitudes of support, defense, and active promotion of the country (Aaker, 1996; Merkle, 2024). Perceived quality, on the other hand, refers to citizens' evaluation of both the tangible and intangible attributes associated with the country and its goods or services (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002).

Another relevant dimension is recognition, understood as the visibility and clarity of the identity elements that make up the country brand, such as symbols, values, or shared narratives, which allow for easy association by the public (Keller et al., 2010). Finally, citizens' preferences reflect their interest in consuming national products for cultural, emotional, or identification reasons (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2024).

Country branding value directly impacts aspects such as national identity, responsible consumption, and the level of support for institutions (Zenker et al., 2017). Overall, it is a symbolic construct that not only affects economic development but also social cohesion, operating from both an individual and collective perspective.

2.3. Segmentation within the country branding framework

Cluster analysis is a multivariate statistical technique that allows for the classification of individuals into homogeneous groups, maximizing internal similarity and minimizing heterogeneity between groups (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2009). Through algorithms such as K-means or hierarchical analysis, this technique allows for the identification of patterns and segmentations from large volumes of data (Kliestikova & Janoskova, 2017; Revilla-Camacho et al., 2022). This methodology is particularly useful in the study of populations and markets, as it enables the construction of sociodemographic profiles that guide both strategic decisions and the formulation of public policies (Everitt et al., 2011). In the field of country branding, cluster analysis allows the identification of citizen groups with similar perceptions and attitudes, facilitating the design of more focused communication strategies (Raji et al., 2025; Kinawy, 2025; Makgosa & Maswabi, 2025).

Sociodemographic segmentation is essential for understanding the internal dynamics of a society. By employing cluster analysis, it is possible to identify groups with shared characteristics that provide a deeper understanding of complex phenomena such as country perception or the valuation of the country brand (Rojas-Méndez & Khoshnevis, 2023). Various studies have demonstrated that citizens, depending on their socioeconomic profile, hold contrasting views on the same national issues. This suggests that a uniform view is inadequate for the design of policies and communication strategies (De Nisco & Oduro, 2022; Henriques et al., 2022; Rodrigo et al., 2023).

Among the variables most frequently used in this type of analysis are sex, age, region of residence, educational level, employment status, and income. Sex allows for the differentiation of strategies according to gender (Vega Saldaña et al., 2019), while age provides insights into generational perceptions (Hakala et al., 2013; Ahn, 2023). Region, for its part, influences the perception of the country due to economic and cultural factors (De Nisco & Oduro, 2022). Employment status affects the view of the national economy (López-Roldán & Fachelli, 2021), and the level of education is linked to a more critical and nuanced view of the country (Talay et al., 2015; Mathai et al., 2025). Finally, income level directly impacts the preference and perception of quality of national products (Leonidou et al., 2022; Ahn, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data collection and sampling

The target population for this study consists of individuals over eighteen years of age who have resided continuously in Ecuador for at least the past five years. Unlike previous research that focused its samples on university students (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2008; Yousaf & Li, 2015; Che-Ha et al., 2016; García de los Salmones et al., 2022). This study intentionally seeks to achieve greater diversity by including participants from different social sectors.

In order to collect empirical data, a self-administered questionnaire was developed using the Google Forms platform. This was distributed through convenience sampling, utilizing social networks and email. To progressively increase the sample size, snowball sampling was employed, a multi-stage selection technique based on social and professional networks (Neuman, 2014). Following methodological recommendations from the literature, the researchers initially contacted participants through their own personal and professional networks (Hair et al., 2010). Subsequently, these initial respondents were asked to share the questionnaire link with their personal contacts, thus generating further waves of participation. The data collection phase took place between July 8 and September 30, 2024. After removing incomplete or incorrectly completed questionnaires, 823 valid responses were obtained (see Annex I. Technical Details of the Questionnaire).

3.2. Analytical model

To address the study's objectives and analyze citizens' perceptions, the two-step cluster analysis technique was chosen. This method allows for the identification of natural groups within the data based on sociodemographic characteristics and attitudes toward national brands, facilitating the segmentation of the population according to the similarity of their responses.

The two-stage analysis is performed in two phases. In the first phase, the data are grouped into subclusters representing segments with similar characteristics, and in the second phase, a hierarchical algorithm merges these subgroups into larger clusters. This procedure is efficient for handling large volumes of data and for working with both categorical and continuous variables. Furthermore, a criterion for selecting the optimal number of clusters is used, making the clustering process more precise.

In addition to cluster analysis, statistical tests were applied to assess differences between groups. Categorical variables were analyzed using frequencies and percentages, and differences between groups were assessed using Pearson's chi-squared test. For continuous variables, descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, median, and mode were calculated, and differences between groups were assessed using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney (1947) and Kruskal-Wallis (1952) tests, due to the non-normality of the data, assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

The reliability of the scales used in the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which measures the internal consistency of the scales. An α value ≥ 0.7 indicates that the scale is reliable and valid for measuring the dimensions of national brand perception. Data analysis was performed with a significance level of 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$), and the Bonferroni correction was applied to multiple comparisons, ensuring the validity and robustness of the results.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Sociodemographic profile of the interviewee

The sample under analysis comprises 823 people, with a relatively balanced gender distribution, predominantly women (52.2%). A small percentage of non-binary individuals (0.6%) are included, reflecting the intention to highlight gender diversity. Geographically, most participants come from the Coastal region (66.0%), followed by the Highlands (25.2%) and the Eastern region (8.9%).

In economic terms, polarization is evident: 28.8% report incomes exceeding \$1,000 per month, while 27.5% earn less than \$400. The intermediate income brackets are less represented. Regarding educational attainment, the sample is characterized by a high level of academic training, with 48.1% holding university degrees and 34.3% postgraduate degrees.

Regarding employment status, a majority have stable employment (permanent contracts and other forms of work, both at 23%), while 20.2% work in the public sector. 16% are unemployed or retired, and 13.7% are in other situations. Only 4.1% are students (Table 1). Overall, the sample represents a predominantly coastal population, highly skilled, and with marked differences in income levels.

Table 1. *Sociodemographic profile of the interviewees.*

Variables		Recount	% of N tables
Gender	Total	823	100.0%
	Man	388	47.1%
	Woman	430	52.2%
	Non-binary	5	0.6%
Region	Total	823	100.0%
	Coast	543	66.0%
	Highlands	207	25.2%
	East	73	8.9%
Monthly personal income	Total	823	100.0%
	<\$400	226	27.5%
	\$400-\$600	127	15.4%
	\$601-800	117	14.2%
	\$801-100	116	14.1%
	>\$1,000	237	28.8%
Studies	Total	823	100.0%
	Without studies	2	0.2%
	Level 1 (Infants)	1	0.1%
	2nd level (Primary and High School Education)	142	17.3%
	3rd level (University Degree)	396	48.1%
	4th level (Postgraduate)	282	34.3%
Employment situation	Total	823	100.0%
	Unemployed/retired	132	16.0%
	Student	34	4.1%
	Permanent contract	189	23.0%
	Public employee	166	20.2%
	Work other	189	23.0%
	Other situations	113	13.7%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The internal reliability of the dimensions was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded values greater than 0.9 in all cases. These values indicate the scales have excellent internal consistency and validity (see Annex 2).

The obtained results allow for an analysis of the perception of various dimensions associated with image, country brand value, and respondents' preferences (see Table 2). According to the results, the country's physical attributes (e.g., landscape and infrastructure) and cultural and emotional components received high scores on the parameters (e.g., mean, median, and mode). These scores affirm the importance that citizens place on heritage, traditions, and affective bonds in constructing the national image. In contrast, the perception is less favorable toward the country's political and economic aspects, as well as its technological development. These dimensions received low scores, highlighting issues of institutional trust and perceived development. The micro-image dimension is intermediate, possibly influenced by individual experiences or current events.

Regarding the national brand value, the brand value, loyalty, quality, and recognition dimensions reflect moderate scores. The fact that the mode coincides with the central value of 5 in all cases, and that the standard deviation reflects some dispersion, could suggest a solid foundation of recognition and appreciation for the country branding. However, there is still considerable potential for growth in order to increase its valuation. A similar pattern emerges when analyzing preferences toward the country branding. The contrast between the

moderate mean of 5.26 and the high mode of 7 suggests that a significant segment of the population is strongly predisposed to prefer domestic products. This finding indicates opportunities to strengthen the emotional connection with the population by leveraging the positive capital derived from appreciation of the country's cultural, physical, and emotional aspects.

Table 2. Average scores per dimension.

Image	Average	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode
Physical dimension	6.21	1.37	7.00	7.00
Cultural dimension	5.73	1.40	6.00	7.00
Emotional dimension	5.71	1.41	6.20	7.00
Social dimension	5.26	1.31	5.40	7.00
Micro-image dimension	5.12	1.31	5.00	5.00
Technological dimension	4.11	1.49	4.00	5.00
Economic dimension	3.96	1.50	3.80	5.00
Political dimension	3.81	1.43	3.80	4.00
Country brand value				
Recognition dimension	5.21	1.34	5.00	5.00
Quality dimension	5.00	1.33	5.00	5.00
Loyalty dimension	4.72	1.47	4.67	5.00
Preferences				
Dimension of a toquilla straw hat	5.95	1.45	7.00	7.00
Shrimp dimension	5.76	1.48	6.00	7.00
Cocoa dimension	5.74	1.44	6.00	7.00
Dimension: country brand preferences	5.26	1.42	5.00	7.00

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.2. Citizen segmentation

Based on this initial overview, a comparative analysis of the average ratings (overall scores) that participants assigned to different evaluated dimensions (e.g., country image, brand value) broken down by the four population segments identified through cluster analysis reveals significant differences among the population profiles. Seven of the eight dimensions show significant differences between segments ($p < 0.05$), except for gender (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Comparison of qualitative variables between segments.

		Total		Segments								Chi2 statistic and p-value
				1		2		3		4		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Sex	Total	818	100.0%	192	100.0%	171	100.0%	254	100.0%	201	100.0%	Chi ² (3) = 5.841, p 0.120
	Man	388	47.4%	88	45.8%	95	55.6%	116	45.7%	89	44.3%	
	Woman	430	52.6%	104	54.2%	76	44.4%	138	54.3%	112	55.7%	
Region	Total	818	100.0%	192	100.0%	171	100.0%	254	100.0%	201	100.0%	Chi ² (6) = 609.958, p<0.001***
	Coast	539	65.9%	143	74.5%	0	0.0%	195	76.8%	201	100.0%	
	Highlands	206	25.2%	0	0.0%	147	86.0%	59	23.2%	0	0.0%	
	East	73	8.9%	49	25.5%	24	14.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	
Studies ¹	Total	818	100.0%	192	100.0%	171	100.0%	254	100.0%	201	100.0%	Chi ² (6) = 856.205, p<0.001***
	2nd level	144	17.6%	0	0.0%	52	30.4%	0	0.0%	92	45.8%	
	3rd level	394	48.2%	169	88.0%	116	67.8%	0	0.0%	109	54.2%	
	4th level	280	34.2%	23	12.0%	3	1.8%	254	100.0%	0	0.0%	
	Total	818	100.0%	192	100.0%	171	100.0%	254	100.0%	201	100.0%	Chi ² (24) = 661.455, p<0.001***
	Not defined	189	23.1%	54	28.1%	11	6.4%	122	48.0%	2	1.0%	
	Special	29	3.5%	13	6.8%	7	4.1%	9	3.5%	0	0.0%	

¹The educational level equivalencies are as follows: Level 2 (primary education and high school), Level 3 (university degree), Level 4 (postgraduate degree).

Employment situation ²	Work or service	77	9.4%	40	20.8%	17	9.9%	14	5.5%	6	3.0%	
	Part-time	47	5.7%	12	6.3%	27	15.8%	4	1.6%	4	2.0%	
	Public employee	164	20.0%	73	38.0%	24	14.0%	63	24.8%	4	2.0%	
	Unemployed	131	16.0%	0	0.0%	31	18.1%	6	2.4%	94	46.8%	
	Student	34	4.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.4%	33	16.4%	
	Work other	35	4.3%	0	0.0%	4	2.3%	13	5.1%	18	9.0%	
	Other situations	112	13.7%	0	0.0%	50	29.2%	22	8.7%	40	19.9%	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 4. Comparison of quantitative variables between segments.

		Total	Segments				Kruskal-Wallis statistic and p-value
			1	2	3	4	
Age	Valid N	818	192	171	254	201	KW(3) = 224.747, p<0.001***
	Average	35.64	37.02	34.44	42.63	26.50	
	Standard deviation	12.67	10.73	14.07	10.46	9.50	
income ³	Valid N	818	192	171	254	201	KW(3) = 431.394, p<0.001***
	Average	704.40	845.31	507.60	1,029.53	326.37	
	Standard deviation	391.28	307.80	293.46	259.89	215.06	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

A two-stage cluster analysis identified four distinct segments based on variables such as education, income, region, and employment status (see Table 5). These clusters represent 99% of the total sample. The resulting four segments have clearly differentiated profiles, which allow for the analysis of perception and evaluation patterns regarding the country's image.

Table 5. Identified socioeconomic segments.

Segment: socioeconomic and cultural level	Description
Segment 1: Stable critics	This group consists of individuals who are formally employed and have university degrees. They have a significant presence in the public sector and a consolidated, structured position in society. The group primarily includes public employees (38%), employees with fixed-term contracts (21%), employees with permanent contracts (28%), and individuals with postsecondary education. They comprise 23.5% of the population and are made up of residents from the Coast (75%) and the Eastern region (25%). The majority have postsecondary education (88%).
Segment 2: Connected optimists	The profile in this segment is more varied in terms of education level and type of employment. They generally experience less stability and have a lower perception of politics and the economy. This group represents 20.9% of the population. They are mainly residents of the Andean region (86%) with secondary (30%) or postsecondary (68%) education. They are employed part time (16%) or in other situations (29%).
Segment 3: Selective demanding consumers	This group is characterized by older age, higher income levels, more education, stable employment, and professional and personal fulfillment. They highly value the physical and emotional dimensions but not the political ones. They represent 31.1% of the population and consist of residents of the Coast (77%) and the Highlands (23%). They are the oldest group, with an average age of 43. All have completed postgraduate studies (fourth level) and are either public employees (25%) or have permanent contracts (48%). They have the highest income level, averaging \$1,029.
Segment 4: Young enthusiasts	The remaining group includes young people with low incomes (\$326 on average) and various employment statuses (students, unemployed, etc.). This group shows a favorable attitude toward culture and has an emotional and patriotic connection to the nation. They represent 24.5% of the population and are exclusively residents of the Coast. They are the youngest group, with an average age of 27. They have completed secondary education (46%) and tertiary education (54%).

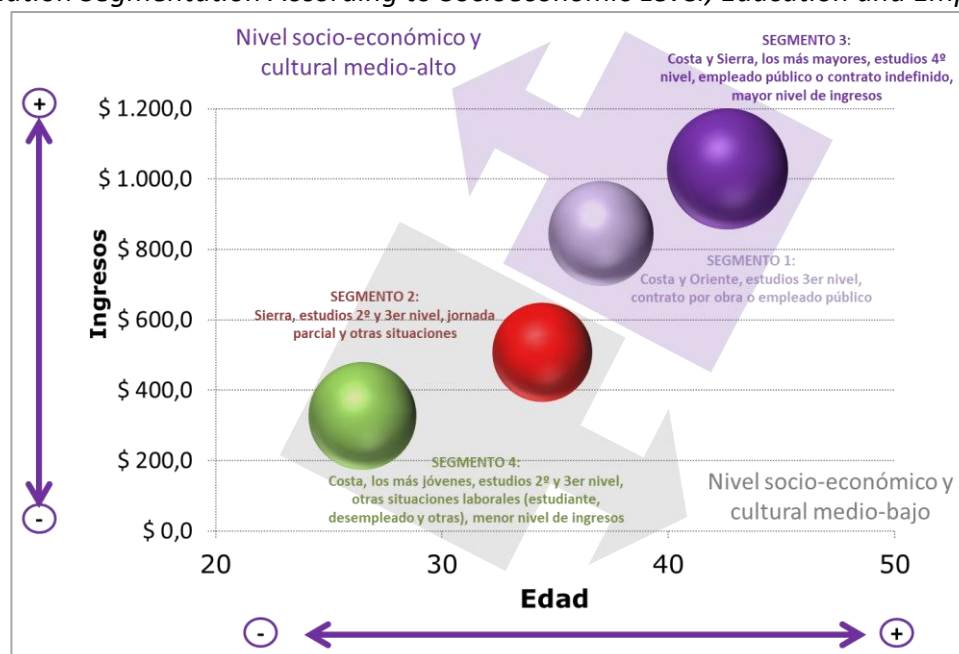
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

²The types of contracts are: not defiend, special emerging, work or service and part-time.

³ The class mark of the intervals has been used to construct a continuous income level and to be able to calculate the mean and standard deviation statistics.

Figure 1 illustrates some of these differences. It shows that Segment 2 has the highest age and income levels compared to Segment 4, which is at the opposite end of the diagonal.

Figure 1. Population Segmentation According to Socioeconomic Level, Education and Employment Status.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

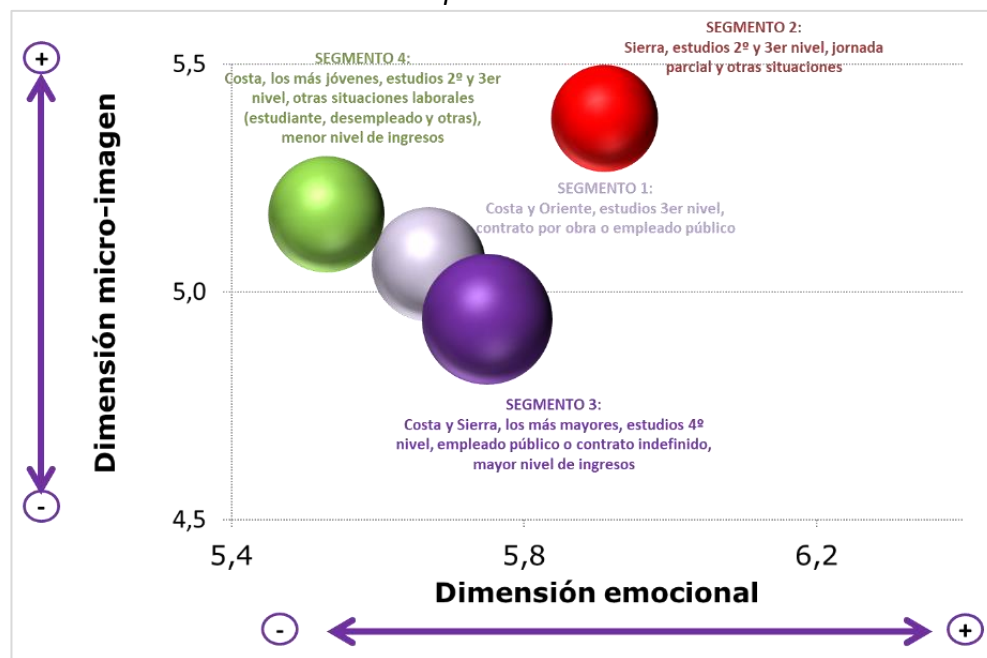
The main differences detected⁴, based on *post-hoc* comparisons between pairs of groups, indicate that, in the physical dimension, participants in segment 3 (characterized by a high socioeconomic and cultural level, with higher levels of education and stable employment) gave significantly higher scores than the other segments. This result suggests that individuals with better socioeconomic conditions tend to value the tangible aspects of the country, such as infrastructure, the physical environment, and access to services, more positively. Conversely, in the technological, economic, and political dimensions, the same segment 3 showed significantly lower scores compared to the other groups. This trend can be interpreted as a more critical perception on the part of individuals with greater cultural and economic capital, who possibly hold higher expectations regarding the country's structural functioning.

Regarding the social and micro-image dimensions, segment 2 (corresponding to a middle socioeconomic level) registered the highest scores. This would indicate a more favorable valuation of social relationships, community environments, and symbols of national identity among people with intermediate income levels, educational attainment, and employment status. Finally, the data show that segment 1, with a middle-to-upper socioeconomic level, scores the cultural dimension most negatively compared to the other segments. This result could be linked to a perception of alienation or dissatisfaction with the cultural elements promoted or perceived in the country.

Figures 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the differences in each dimension across the four segments. Figure 2 shows that, while the emotional dimension does not present statistically significant differences between segments, there is a general trend toward positive valuation, suggesting that the affective bond with the country tends to remain relatively stable across the different sociodemographic groups. In contrast, the micro-image dimension reveals greater dispersion, particularly in segments 2 and 4, which attribute greater value to the national product.

⁴Comparisons in which no significant differences were found are omitted.

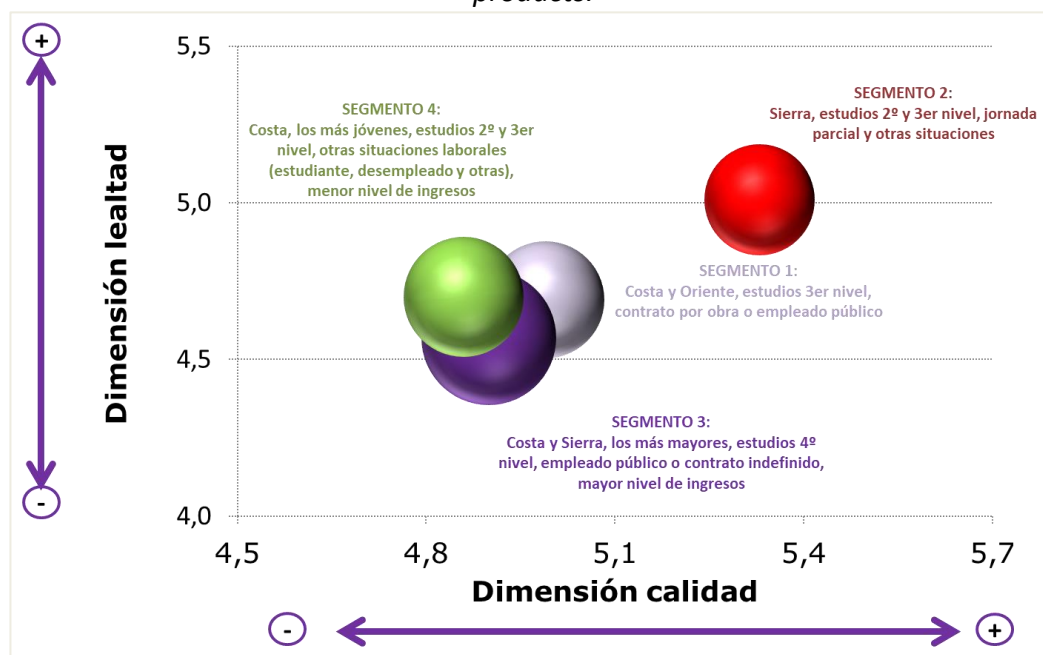
Figure 2. Sociodemographic distribution according to emotional dimension and micro-image of emblematic products.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Figure 3 shows significant differences between the segments regarding perceived quality and loyalty to products associated with the country brand. It is noteworthy that segment 2 registered the highest scores in both dimensions, even surpassing segment 3, which is linked to higher income and education levels.

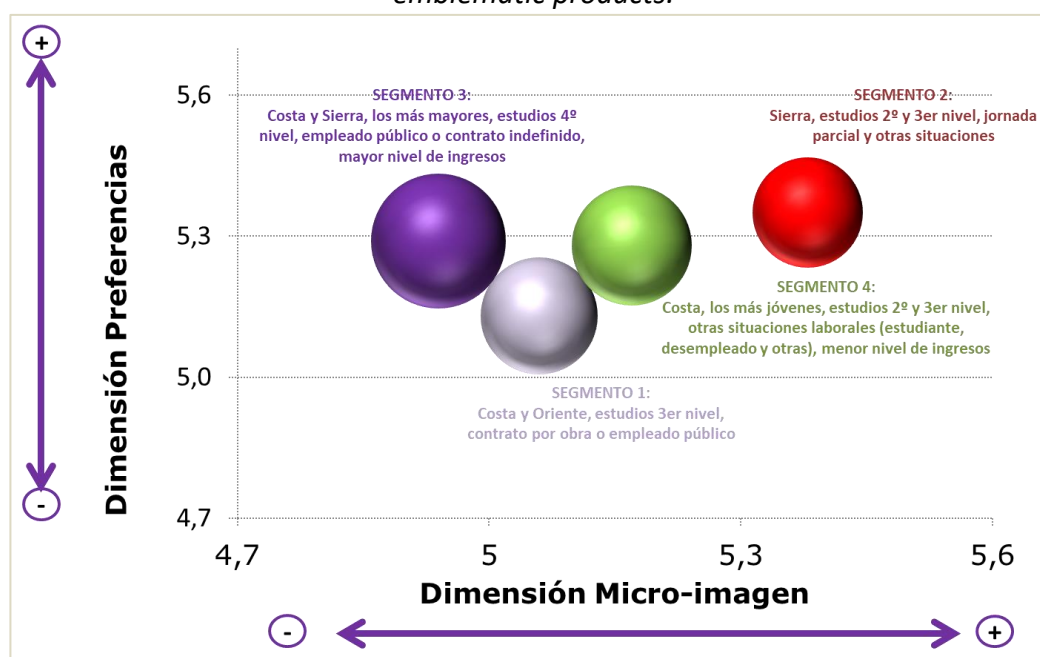
Figure 3. Sociodemographic distribution according to perceived quality and loyalty towards country brand products.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Finally, Figure 4 shows that the preference for local brands exhibits less variability across segments compared to the specific valuation of iconic products (micro-image dimension). Again, segments 2 and 4 show a stronger inclination towards these products, highlighting the importance of considering not only the country's overall image but also the symbolic meaning that certain goods acquire for different social groups.

Figure 4. Sociodemographic distribution according to preferences for country brand and micro-image of emblematic products.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study are consistent with the theoretical foundations of social identity theory (Stets & Biga, 2003), demonstrating that sociodemographic variables significantly influence the construction of perceptions about the country's image. This confirms that such perceptions are not homogeneous but vary according to a citizen's position in society, coinciding with previous work that highlights the importance of segmentation in country branding analysis (Rojas-Méndez & Khoshnevis, 2023; Makgosa & Maswabi, 2025).

This study provides empirical evidence on how political, economic, and technological factors are valued differently according to sociodemographic variables such as age, education level, income, and region of residence, in turn influencing the consumption of national brands. These findings support the usefulness of a segmented perspective that allows for the identification of specific patterns in the relationship with these brands, showing significant correlations with attitudes such as loyalty, perceived quality, and recognition of local products (Che-Ha et al., 2016; Thourmrungrroje et al., 2024).

This finding demonstrates how consumption becomes a symbolic and affective act, based on identity, cultural, or social factors that manifest in local identity positions, thus broadening the conventional approach of the country-of-origin effect oriented toward international markets. This pattern, confirming the first hypothesis, could be interpreted as a form of identity expression, in which certain emblematic products (cacao, bananas, and toquilla straw hats, in the case of Ecuador) act as elements of cultural connection for groups with more limited socioeconomic conditions or with a stronger emotional connection to the local environment.

Validation of the second hypothesis confirms that the segments identified through cluster analysis exhibit distinct patterns; that is, citizens perceive both their country's image and its relationship with the consumption of national brands differently. This heterogeneity breaks with generalist approaches and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the country branding from an internal perspective. The results indicate that segment 2 is strategic due to its favorable attitude toward local brands, despite not having the highest levels of income or education. This reinforces, as Revilla-Camacho et al. (2022) and Kinawy (2025) point out, the importance of adapting country branding strategies to the characteristics and expectations of each citizen group.

The only dimension valued consistently across all segments was the emotional one, suggesting that the affective bond with the country constitutes a unifying element (Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Riefler, 2017) and a valuable symbolic resource for designing national campaigns. However, this shared sentiment does not negate differences in more rational dimensions, such as politics or economics, where significant generational gaps emerge. This is the case, for example, among young people. This group values rational aspects such as technological innovation or economic performance more positively. This attitude aligns with the findings of other studies, which indicate a greater openness to change and modernity among this group (Maher & Carter, 2011; Hakala et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the data corroborates the third hypothesis regarding attitudes toward national brands. Attitudes toward Ecuadorian brands (loyalty, perceived quality, and recognition) varied significantly according to sociodemographic profile. This finding suggests that the positive valuation of national products is not necessarily conditioned by socioeconomic status but rather may be influenced by a greater degree of familiarity, accessibility, or identification with the local (Thoumrungroje et al., 2024). In this sense, segment 2 again emerges as a strategic group due to its interest in and positive disposition toward local brands, as well as its significant demographic base within the population.

In contrast, the fourth hypothesis, concerning preferences for emblematic products, is only partially supported. While the overall perception of the country brand shows no significant differences between segments, relevant contrasts were observed when analyzing specific products, such as the toquilla straw hat, cacao, or shrimp. This distinction aligns with Govers (2018) and Fernández-Cavia et al. (2024). These authors criticize generalizations about the country brand. This differentiation offers strategic opportunities for marketing campaigns that seek to connect emotionally with these segments, focusing on specific products that are symbolically emblematic for the country and used as symbols of identity and sense of belonging.

Overall, the results highlight the need for segmented strategies. The consumption of national products is a form of identity affirmation that varies among different segments of the population. The Ecuadorian case offers a valuable perspective for other contexts that share tensions in the construction of national identity and in domestic consumption decisions. Therefore, the conclusions presented here are not limited to a single local reality but are applicable to other national contexts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article is part of a growing body of research analyzing the internal construction of a country's image and its impact on local consumer behavior (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2022; Makgosa & Maswabi, 2025). In contrast to a literature traditionally focused on the external projection of the country brand, our research offers a critical perspective by revealing how different sociodemographic segments shape distinct narratives about Ecuador, its brands, and its collective identity.

Based on a two-stage cluster analysis, four citizen groups with diverse perceptions, priorities, and emotional connections to national brands were identified. This finding reinforces the premise that a country's image is a multidimensional and non-uniform construct, influenced by structural factors such as education level, income, employment status, and region of residence (Zeugner-Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; De Nisco & Oduro, 2022). As Rojas-Méndez and Khoshnevis (2023) point out, addressing this heterogeneity is crucial to avoid generic communication strategies that ignore the particularities of society.

The overall results of the study offer a detailed view of how Ecuadorians perceive their country, showing that these perceptions vary substantially according to demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. These findings have important implications for marketing strategies, public policy, and future research on country image, which will be addressed in the following section.

The empirical results demonstrate that the cultural and emotional dimensions are particularly influential and prevalent across all segments, aligning with the contributions of Shimp and Sharma (1987), Akama and Kieti (2007), and Fernández-Cavia et al. (2024), who highlight the symbolic function of consumption as an expression of belonging and national affection. Likewise, the growing importance of the technological dimension is confirmed, especially among young people (segment 4), validating the observations of Maher and Carter (2011) and Govers (2018) regarding the association between innovation and national pride among younger generations.

Segment 3, which comprises individuals with high economic and job stability, greater purchasing power, and higher levels of education, demonstrates a strong sensitivity to the country's quality of life attributes, prestige, and stability, understood as a perceived confidence in economic development and institutions. This means greater willingness to consume national brands that reflect these attributes. For them, buying local products is not only a rational choice based on product quality but also a way to support the country. This aligns with the arguments of Aaker (1996) and Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002), who highlight the role of the country-of-origin effect in perceived value in markets oriented towards high-end or premium products or services. In contrast, Segment 2, referring to citizens with lower incomes and more precarious employment but with a strong cultural and emotional identity, located in the Highlands, bases its connection with national brands more on affective identification with the local. This segment prioritizes cultural and emotional elements. They also value local brands, but from different motivations such as pride in the culture and their belonging to the country, in line with what Che-Ha et al. (2016) found on the consumption of national brands as a form of identity affirmation in contexts of precarity.

The main contribution of this study is to broaden the conceptualization of the country-of-origin effect, traditionally applied in international contexts, and adapt it to the domestic level as a localized manifestation of national identity. As Anholt (2005) emphasizes, an effective country brand is one that connects the national narrative with the values, aspirations, and concrete needs of its citizens.

Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective, the results suggest a new way of interpreting country branding as a symbolic tool that articulates senses of belonging, pride, and future projection. This approach avoids generic communication strategies and promotes segmentation that is more sensitive to the country's sociocultural diversity (Rojas-Méndez & Khoshnevis, 2023). Country branding should be understood as a conceptual structure that helps organize identities or social discourses, articulated in objective dimensions (technology, economy, infrastructure) and subjective dimensions (emotions, culture, pride). This articulation manifests itself differently among social groups. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a segmented and contextualized perspective in studies that analyze nation branding (Zenker et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2025).

6.1. Theoretical and practical implications

At a theoretical level, the implications of these findings reinforce that this multidimensional structure reflects the theoretical framework of Zeugner-Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009), integrating cognitive and affective components that, as Anholt (2005) points out, interact to shape national reputation. Furthermore, from a methodological perspective, the design allows for: (a) segmenting consumers according to differentiated perceptions (De Nisco & Oduro, 2022), demonstrating how sociodemographic variables moderate the country image; (b) identifying strategic levers by target group (e.g., technology for young people, cultural authenticity for specific regions); and (c) evaluating gaps between generic attributes (macro image) and concrete product evaluations (micro image). This instrument constitutes an empirical contribution to the literature on country branding by articulating internationally validated scales with local specifics. It offers insights for researchers, as well as for public and private managers of national brands.

At a practical level, the findings have direct implications for the design of institutional communication campaigns and territorial marketing strategies, tailored to each group. For segment 3 (greater economic and job stability), it is suggested that attributes of quality, prestige, and institutional development be emphasized, fostering a rational and symbolic disposition toward national consumption, in line with Aaker (1996) and Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002). Segment 2, on the other hand, with lower purchasing power but a strong regional and emotional identity (located in the Highlands), bases its connection with brands on cultural pride and belonging, as noted by Che-Ha et al. (2016). Segment 4, composed of young people with high technological adaptability, responds positively to the image of Ecuador as an innovative country, which confirms the importance of positioning technology as a core element of identity.

From this empirical approach, the results are useful for public administration and communication policy. Understanding the diverse perceptions of citizens allows for the development of more effective public policies and more inclusive institutional campaigns. A nation's brand, as a symbolic expression of its collective identity, can be a strategic tool for promoting economic, cultural, and social development that aligns with the expectations of its various social groups.

6.2. Limitations and future lines of research

This study has certain limitations that should be considered. First, it was only applied within a specific time frame, so it should be supplemented with other longitudinal studies that cover a broader time period to allow for comparisons at different points in time. As Lagae (2019) and López-Roldán and Fachelli (2021) point out, factors such as these can influence the stability of the identified clusters. Future research could expand the sample to new regions and conduct longitudinal studies evaluating how the country's perception evolves in response to current events or institutional changes. A notable methodological limitation is the use of convenience and snowball sampling, which could affect the representativeness of the findings. Future studies could address this limitation by using longitudinal designs and representative samples for each region. Additional variables to explore include responsible consumption, the influence of social networks on the projection of the country's image, and the relationship between macro (institutional) and micro (community) images (Pappu et al., 2007; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015).

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Annex 1. Technical details of the questionnaire

Universe	Residents in Ecuador over 18 years of age and with at least 5 years living in the country.
Scope of study	All regions of the country, except Galapagos.
Questionnaire type	Structured questionnaire administered.
Sample size	823 valid surveys.
Data collection location	Data collection is carried out through the tool developed by Google "Google Forms", using convenience sampling.
Sampling error	±3.1%.
Confidence level	95% (p = q = 0.50).
Fieldwork period	From July to September 2024.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Annex 2. Cronbach's Alpha per dimension

BLOCK	DIMENSION	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Country Image	Physical	A.F.1 It has very attractive natural spaces A.F.2 It has numerous natural resources A.F.3 It has beautiful landscapes A.F.4 It is rich in natural beauty	0.981
	Economic	A.E.1 It has a highly developed economy A.E.2 It has a high standard of living A.E.3 It has a highly developed welfare system A.E.4 It is an attractive place to do business A.E.5 It is a safe place to invest	0.948
	Technological	A.T.1 It has a high level of technological development A.T.2 It has a high level of industrialization A.T.3 It has high technical capabilities in R&D&I	0.958
	Social	A.S.1 The people of Ecuador are trustworthy A.S.2 The people in Ecuador are very hardworking. A.S.3 The people in Ecuador will make me feel welcome as a visitor A.S.4 I like the Ecuadorian lifestyle. A.S.5 The people in Ecuador have a high level of education	0.927
	Policy	A.P.2 It is well-governed. A.P.3 It is politically stable. A.P.4 It has a free market system. A.P.5 It plays a relevant role in world politics.	0.918
	Cultural	A.C.1 It has its own culture that is different from other countries. A.C.2 It has numerous cultural resources. A.C.3 It has cultural symbols representative of the country. A.C.4 It offers a wide selection of entertainment.	0.956
	Emotional	A.E.1 I like Ecuador. A.E.2 I admire Ecuador. A.E.3 I respect Ecuador. A.E.4 I trust Ecuador. A.E.5 I have a good feeling about Ecuador.	0.952
	Micro-image	A.M.1 They are of good quality. A.M.2 They are of high status. A.M.3 They have international prestige. A.M.4 They are internationally recognized brands. A.M.5 They are meticulously extracted and manufactured.	0.948
Country branding value	Loyalty	B.L.1 I consider myself loyal in buying brands from the country. B.L.2 Ecuadorian brands are my first choice. B.L.3 I will not buy products made in other countries if I can buy the same product made in Ecuador.	0.930
	Quality	B.C.1 Ecuadorian brand products are likely to be of extremely high quality. B.C.2 Ecuadorian brand products are likely to be functional (i.e., in their design, ease of use, utility, and comfort) and very functional. B.C.3 Buying Ecuadorian products makes me feel good. B.C.4 I enjoy buying Ecuadorian products. B.C.5 Buying Ecuadorian products brings me social approval. B.C.6 Buying Ecuadorian products improves how others perceive me.	0.944
	Recognition	B.R.1 I can recognize Ecuadorian brand products. B.R.2 I am familiar with Ecuadorian brand products. B.R.3 I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of Ecuadorian brands.	0.956
Preferences	Country brand	C.2.1 It makes sense to buy Ecuadorian brands instead of others, even if the products are the same. C.2.2 I prefer to buy Ecuadorian brands, even if there are others with similar characteristics. C.2.3 If I find another brand as good as the Ecuadorian one, I will prefer to buy the brand from my country. C.2.4 The next time I buy, I will choose the Ecuadorian brand.	0.956

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

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Conceptualization: Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen. **Software:** Marín Palacios, Cristina. **Validation:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen and Marín Palacios, Cristina. **Formal Analysis:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen. **Curation of data:** Marín Palacios, Cristina. **Drafting-Preparation of the original draft:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen and Marín Palacios, Cristina. **Writing-Revision and Edition:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen and Marín Palacios, Cristina. **Visualization:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen and Marín Palacios, Cristina. **Supervision:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen and Marín Palacios, Cristina. **Project Management:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen and Marín Palacios, Cristina. **All The authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript:** Paradinas Márquez, María del Carmen and Marín Palacios, Cristina.

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AUTHOR(S):

José Antonio Pedraza Rodríguez

University of Cordoba.

José Antonio Pedraza Rodríguez earned his doctoral degree from the University of Córdoba. His research focuses on economic and social studies related to innovation and knowledge transfer. Another area of his research focuses on the governance and organization of knowledge transfer and innovation. He is part of the team carrying out the project "Knowledge Transfer and Gender: Processes of Inequality Between Women and Men at the Interface of Science, the Economy, and Society" (Ref. PID2022-137635OB-I00), which is funded by the Spanish State Research Agency. Dr. Pedraza currently leads the research group on social and economic innovation and knowledge transfer, as well as the CSIC-UCO associated unit, "Social and Economic Innovation and Knowledge Transfer - ITC."

japedraza@uco.es

Índice H: 7

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8845-2666>

Scopus ID: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jose-Pedraza-Rodriguez>

Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=B_qPVxQAAAAJ&hl=es

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jose-Pedraza-Rodriguez>

María Elizabeth Arteaga García

University of San Gregorio de Portoviejo.

María Elizabeth Arteaga García is a doctoral candidate at the University of Córdoba. Her research focuses on analyzing the development and sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in dynamic economic contexts, as well as the impact of governance, institutional transparency, and vulnerable groups in public administration and phenomena such as inflation. Additionally, she researches strategic positioning through country branding and its relationship with domestic consumer preferences, brand value, self-image, foreign trade, and the international projection of local entrepreneurship. Arteaga is part of the CREIA network in Colombia and the REMCI-Ecuador network, both of which promote the application of artificial intelligence in classrooms. She directed the research project "The Internationalization of the Ecuadorian Toquilla Straw Hat," completed in 2024. She is currently the head of the Economics undergraduate program.

mearteaga@sangregorio.edu.ec

Índice H: 4

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9156-6525>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?hl=es&user=dcDndrEAAAAJ>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maria-Arteaga-Garcia-2/research>

Julia Margarita Núñez-Tabales

University of Cordoba.

Julia Margarita Núñez-Tabales holds a doctorate from the University of Córdoba in Spain and is a full professor in the Department of Statistics and Business at the same institution. She has over 25 years of teaching experience in Business Organization. Her research focuses on country branding, corporate social responsibility, sustainable community-based tourism, and credit rating risk divergence, among other topics. She has published over 60 articles in prestigious journals such as the Journal of Business Ethics, Leisure Sciences, Current Issues in Tourism, Tourism Economics, and Discover Sustainability. She has also participated as a speaker at numerous international conferences.

es2nutaj@uco.es

Índice H: 16

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6597-6029>

Scopus ID: <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=24559516200>

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