Original Article

Reasons for country image evaluation: A study on China image from a Brazilian perspective

Janaina de Moura Engracia Giraldi

is a professor of Marketing and Management at University of São Paulo, Brazil. Janaina received her Doctoral and Master's degrees from the University de São Paulo. She also obtained a Master's of Science degree from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KULeuven), Belgium. Her research interests include the country-of-origin effect, country image, consumers' personal values, retail store image, retail private labels and strategic marketing.

Ana Akemi Ikeda

is an associate professor at University of São Paulo, Brazil. Her international articles have been published in *European Business Review*, *Qualitative Market Research* – An International Journal, and The Qualitative Report, among others. She is an active participant in international congresses such as those hosted by the Academy of Marketing Science. Her research interests pertain to consumer behaviour, services marketing, marketing research techniques and marketing planning.

Marcos Cortez Campomar

is a full professor of Marketing at University of São Paulo. He is a former Dean of Business School at University of Sao Paulo (Ribeirão Preto Campus); former National Secretary of Services and former Representative of Brazil at Mercosur. He has several books and articles on Marketing and Marketing Services.

ABSTRACT This article's objective is to study the evaluations toward a country image, identifying groups of consumers with different underlying reasons for these evaluations. This is a descriptive and quantitative research, which applied the personification scale in a sample of Brazilian executives. A cluster analysis was carried out based on the respondents' scores for the country image dimensions in order to identify different reasons for the bad evaluation of Brazilians about Chinese products. Two different respondents' profiles for China's negative assessment were identified and it was seen that the bad evaluations are because of different scores attributed to the image dimensions named as 'Underdog', 'Economic Value Seeker' and 'Quality and Satisfaction Seeker'. As for a practical implication, Chinese companies that are interested in marketing their products in Brazil should develop special communication programs, with the goal of reducing the negative bias that consumers have with respect to Chinese products.

Correspondence: Janaina de Moura Engracia Giraldi University of São Paulo (USP), Av. Bandeirantes 3900, Ribeirão Preto (SP), CEP: 14.040–900, Brazil E-mail: jgiraldi@usp.br

INTRODUCTION

A country's image influences consumers' evaluations regarding products made in this country, generating the so-called 'country-of-origin effect'. Studies on the subject have tried to identify processes that may help explain how the country of origin has an influence on the evaluation of a

product. The 'country of origin' construct is developed from the idea that people make stereotyped assessments with regard to other people and countries and, consequently, the products manufactured in these countries.[1]

The first empirical test of the influence of country of origin on the acceptance and success of a product was conducted by Schooler,[2] who found significant differences in the assessments of products that were identical as far as all their attributes were concerned, with the exception of the country specified on the 'made in' label. Since the work of Schooler, the country-of-origin effect has been the theme at over 1000, with at least 400 of them being published in academic journals,[3] which demonstrates the huge interest in this research topic.

Consumers' stereotypes of countries and people may transcend the assessment of specific brands or products and, up to a point, determine the buying intentions and behavior of individuals. Because of that, Pharr[4] indicates that the decades of study on the topic have led to an apparently unequivocal conclusion: a product's country of origin may influence the assessment judgments of consumers with regard to this product. To Chuang and Yen,[5] through repeated use and learning, consumers associate the country of origin heuristically and naturally with a particular product attribute (including its quality and price).

Despite studies on the theme indicating that products' country of origin may influence consumer assessment of these products, Pharr[4] points out that recently there have been discussions on the importance of product origin is in the age of global brands. For Usunier,[6] production is increasingly globalized, with diversified production sources, combined in the same end product. Therefore, the author believes that information about products' country of origin is often unknown by consumers, or plays a minor role upon the assessment of purchase alternatives.

Consequently, he summarizes the conditions in which the country-of-origin effect is present: (a) the consumer needs to consider the information about the product's country of origin to be relevant to his/her choice process; (b) the consumer needs to be sufficiently motivated to research and compare the different origins of products, which occurs when the perceived risk relative to the purchase is high; (c) this motivation depends, in part, on the preference for national products, which is linked to the consumer's patriotism or ethnocentrism, their preference for foreign products or even their preference for specific origins that are associated with certain attributes; (d) the consumer needs to consider this information to be more important than other information, like price, the store's reputation, perceived risk and so on; (e) finally, the consumer needs to find this information easily on the product, or be able to get it from a salesperson.

Although there seems to be a consensus on the fact that the country of origin has an impact on product evaluation, there is, at the same time, a constant debate about the magnitude of this effect. Particularly, this debate considers the strength of other intrinsic and extrinsic information about the product and also environmental and cultural factors that may facilitate or inhibit trust in the country of origin.

Characteristics that may have an influence on the country-of-origin effect are: consumers' level of education and conservatism, age and gender, fluency in the language of the country, the number of clues about the product, the need for cognition, motivation, degree of involvement, familiarity with the brand and culture[7–14] One must highlight that the country-of-origin effect may vary according to the country, the sample used and the products evaluated.[15]

Variables related to the type/category of product also play a role in the use of country of origin as a criterion for

choosing among alternatives.[16] For example, information about the country of origin is generally more efficient for agricultural products than for manufactured products, given the historical association between production and the country or region of origin.[17]

Furthermore, Hsieh's study[18] indicates that the level of market development (defined as the availability in international brands) may exercise an impact on the country-of-origin effect. It should be weaker in highly developed markets than in the less developed ones, as the companies tend to develop more differentiated products when the market development level is high. In more developed markets, the information on the products is more easily made available and the consumers tend have more confidence in information intrinsic to the product.

More recently, studies have tried to relate the country-of-origin effect to aspects of the consumer's information processing, as the way consumers acquire, process and use the information about the country of origin.[19] For instance, the work of Aboulnasr[20] has examined the conditions by which the stereotyped information leads to more favorable product's and country's evaluations, working two concepts: how much the information helps during the evaluation task and how much the information is consistent with other stimuli offered to consumer. Other example of a recent study focusing on the consumer's information processing of the country-of-origin information is Laroche et al's.[21] The authors found that country image and product beliefs affected product evaluations simultaneously regardless of consumers' level of familiarity with a country's products.

Therefore, it is verified that the effects derived from the information about the origin country are directly affected by the country image. Many approaches have already been used to evaluate a country's image, applying one-dimensional and multidimensional scales to measure the concept. In this context, this article aims to study the evaluations toward a country image, identifying groups of consumers with different underlying reasons for these evaluations. In order to do so, it was first applied the scale of Nebenzahl et al[22] in a sample of Brazilian consumers. Afterwards, a cluster analysis was carried out, based on the identified dimensions. In the following part, some concepts are presented, to supply the theoretical support to this article.

COUNTRY IMAGE

The effects deriving from information about the country of origin are directly affected by the country image. According to Verlegh and Steenkamp,[23] in addition to being a cognitive cue of a product's quality, the country of origin also refers to emotions, identity, pride and autobiographical memories. Such symbolic and emotional connotations transform the country of origin into an image attribute, which has been seen as a significant determinant of consumer preferences and an important source of brand value.

However, despite the growing interest on the construct called 'country-of-origin image', Roth and Diamantopoulos[24] and Laroche et al[21] indicate that the literature has reached no consensus on how to conceptualize and operationalize it. No systematic analysis of extant conceptualizations and associated measurement scales of the country-of-origin image exist, leaving researchers with little guidance on how to best operationalize the construct in empirical efforts. As a result, many authors mix the concepts of a specific country's image and the image of the products manufactured in such country.

An example of this mistake is Han's[25] definition, which considers country image as the difference of domestic and foreign

products' perceived quality. In the same way, Nagashima,[26] the first author to explicitly define country image, described it as the representation, reputation and stereotype that business man and consumers attribute to a specific country's product. In their research, Roth and Diamantopoulos[24] present other authors that have defined the country image as, essentially, a product-related construct.

On the other hand, there are authors who have defined the country image focusing on their role as origins of products and as a generic construct consisting of generalized images created not only by representative products but also by other dimensions.[24] For instance, according to Papadopoulos,[27] country image is defined as an image and the thoughts it creates in the consumer's minds. In the same way, Verlegh and Steenkamp[23] indicate that a country's image refers to mental representations regarding people, products, culture and national symbols of a country.

The inconsistency in the definitional domains of the COO construct noted in Roth and Diamantopoulos' work[24] can result in considerable confusion regarding its conceptual specification. Nonetheless, most recent studies of country image definitions include general evaluations a consumer has regarding the quality of a given country's products. In this regard, Jaffe and Nebenzahl[28] define country image as the mental representations people have about countries. The inferences consumers make of a country are related to the beliefs these consumers have about this country, which are formed by past associations.

Jaffe and Nebenzahl[28] explain that the country image is influenced by the people's perception about that country's people, its economic development and its products' quality. In this context, Jaffe and Nebenzahl[29] state that the choice of an appropriate scale to measure the countries images has been deeply investigated and reported in the behavioral and marketing literature. Nonetheless, Roth and Diamantopoulos[24] indicate that, because several notions of country image exist in the literature, there are also different specifications of the conceptual domain. The operational implication of these differences is also a plethora of measurement instruments.

For example, Roth and Romeo[30] posit that, although the studies on country images use different variables to evaluate this image, four elements are constantly present in the researches: innovativeness, design, prestige and workmanship. All of these dimensions consist of production or marketing attributes and are derived from cognitive perceptions of the country and its products. Roth and Romeo's[30] and Han's[31] studies suggest that the country-of-origin image is a one-dimensional concept, referring only to aspects related to the country's products, and not a multidimensional one, which would include other elements.

However, according to Jaffe and Nebenzahl,[28] the concept of country image is not one-dimensional. In this regard, some studies conducted after 1992 considered the country-of-origin image as a multidimensional concept, with the focus being moved from the product to the country. Additionally, they believe that other misconceptions in research on country image are: to consider a country's image as being independent of the products' image and to consider the country's image as a static phenomenon. For the authors, the image of a country affects the image of its products and, in turn, the experience with the products causes changes in the image of the country.

Considering the multidimensional facets of the country image, Martin and Eroglu[15] worked with three dimensions: political, economic and technological. In turn, Pisharodi and Parameswaran[32] developed their work to measure a country's image using three groups of items, each one with its own dimensions (General Country

Attributes, General Product Attributes and Specific Product Attributes). Their original scale had 40 items, each measured on an agreement 10-point rating scale. Pereira et al[33] revised this scale and offered a new one consisting of 16 items spread over five dimensions, resulting from a study developed in Taiwan, China and India (the revised scale can be usefully applied to help understand the country image of products entering certain Asian countries).

Finally, Nebenzahl et al[22] have developed a scale to evaluate countries images, based on the frame of reference and conceptual framework of consumers rather than that of researchers, in an approach called 'personification'. In their research, the authors asked consumers the following question: 'A person who buys home appliances manufactured in [name of country] is …', in which [name of country] represents the country whose image is being evaluated.

When respondents were asked to describe a person who buys a product from a particular country, instead of describing the product itself, the reply obtained is associated with the buyer's own attitudinal, behavioral, social and personality concepts. Respondents' evaluations of people who buy products manufactured in a particular country characterize the products manufactured in that country. Thus, the methodology makes it easier to identify the perceptual dimensions that consumers use to evaluate products.[22] The differences observed among the evaluations of different countries represent the country-of-origin effect.

Nebenzahl et al's[22] study resulted in three country image dimensions, representing different personality profiles that are related to people who buy products made in other countries: 'Quality and Satisfaction Seeker', 'Economic Value Seeker' and 'Underdog'. Considering this background, it was decided to develop a field research in Brazil about this subject, in order to verify how

a group of consumers evaluate China image. The field research is described in the following topic.

METHODOLOGY

This article's objective is to verify how Brazilians evaluate products manufactured in China (and, consequently, China image itself), and also to observe which type of 'personification' of people who buys Chinese products emerge in this study. It is expected to be obtained the evaluations toward China image, and also to be identified groups of consumers with different underlying reasons for these evaluations, based on their 'personification' ratings.

This is a quantitative, descriptive-type research, which used the survey method to collect data. Firstly, the personification scale of Nebenzahl et al[22] was applied in a sample of Brazilian consumers. It was asked respondents to evaluate the extent they agreed to phrases that described Chinese home appliances and people who buy these products.

Home appliances were chosen, because it was necessary to define the product analyzed in this study. Previous researches have shown that the country-of-origin effect varies according to the category of product[34,22] and the choice of home appliances is justified by the fact that China, the study's target country, manufactures such products and sells them in Brazil.

The consumers' assessments of Chinese home appliances and of the people who buy such products were collected by means of a scale ranging from 1 to 9, according to the degree to which respondents agreed with each sentence (negative sentences had their valence reverted). This research's population was the executives from the business and marketing areas who had taken Executive MBA courses in different institutions located in the State of Sao Paulo, Brazil. This State was chosen, because it is responsible for approximately

one-third of Brazilian Gross Domestic Product, making it the biggest economy of South America and one of the biggest economies in Latin America, second after Mexico, and also because the State is the more industrialized one in the country. Considering the three institutions studied, the total number of people is nearly 3000 students. The population was defined in this way because this group of executives is a segment that is of interest to companies, because they are characterized as being potential purchasers of foreign products.

They could easily afford to pay for the product under investigation in this research (as they are part of the most affluent consumer category). Additionally, because São Paulo is the wealthiest state in Brazil and one of the largest economies in Latin America it was expected that the target population would be well connected internationally. Moreover, although the middle class in Brazil has become a major consumer of electronics and home appliances in Brazil in 2010, displacing the wealthiest families, the per capita spending of these middle class consumers is lower than the upper classes'. It is observed that the middle class in Brazil represents 50.5 per cent of the population and accounts for 45 per cent of household appliances spending in the country, whereas the upper classes represent only 10.5 per cent of the population, but accounts for 37 per cent of these expenditures.[35]

For this research, as the population is fairly homogenous in demographic terms, a non-probabilistic sample was used,[36] with the executives being chosen using a convenience criterion. The choice of this field research was to collect information via a self-administered electronic questionnaire because of the practical nature of this method. The questionnaire was placed on an Internet page to which respondents were directed by means of a link placed in the invitation e-mail.

As it would be simple to invite all the elements of the population via e-mail, and because the response rate would be uncertain, it was decided to send invitations to all elements of the population so that they would have the opportunity to take part in the research. However, not everybody was expected to reply to the survey, thus characterizing it as a census.

Fricker and Schonlau[37] state that it is possible to implement Internet-based surveys in ways that are effective and cost-efficient. A list of advantages of this survey collection mode prepared by Wright[38] includes: the ability of the Internet to provide access to groups and individuals who would be difficult, if not impossible, to reach through other channels, Internet-based survey research may save time for researchers, allowing researchers to collect data while they work on other tasks, and online survey researchers can also save money by moving to an electronic medium from a paper format.

However, the main disadvantage is related to sampling issues, including the self-selection bias.[39] These sampling issues inhibit researchers' ability to make generalizations about study findings, which limits their skill to estimate population parameters.[38] Nonetheless, as in this study it was conducted a non-probability research, these issues are somewhat less of a concern, as it is already assumed that we will not be able to estimate population parameters and generalize the results for the study population.

A pre-test was conducted for the research instrument, and some items were adapted in order to be more understandable for the population. The invitation was reinforced by the professors during the courses. Data were collected from June to August 2006.

RESULTS

In total, 201 replies were received, which corresponds to a response rate of 6.7 per cent. The respondents' average age is

36 years old, with a standard deviation of 8.5 years. Most of the participants were male (68.2 per cent), whereas the position of Commercial Manager was the most frequent among the respondents, with 20.5 per cent of them holding this position; the second most frequent position is Director (14.0 per cent).

The degree of knowledge that respondents had about China was checked. Most of them had some knowledge, with only 1.5 per cent of them saying they knew nothing about the country, whereas 82.6 per cent had already read about it, 60.2 per cent had already heard about it and 29.4 per cent said they knew some Chinese people. Furthermore, on a 5-point scale of knowledge (1 representing 'I know very well' and 5 representing 'I know nothing'), the average obtained was 3.08, close to the intermediary value of the scale (equal to 3).

In this research, data related to China image was reduced, using exploratory factor analysis, in such a way as to compare the resulting dimensions with the ones idealized by Nebenzahl et al.[22] Value for KMO test was equal to 0.842, which can be considered an excellent result according to Hair et al[40] and Malhotra.[41]

The extraction method used in the factor analysis was the main components analysis with Varimax rotation. Initially, the criterion used for factor extraction was that of eigenvalues > 1. With this criterion, seven factors were obtained, which jointly explain 62.68 per cent of the total variance of the elements. However, three factors ended up with few elements (two or three) and four factors explained, each one, < 5 per cent of total variance. Furthermore, the scree plot test indicated that, after the third factor, the solution stopped from been optimal. In this sense, a solution with fewer factors was forced, stipulating a minimum of 5 per cent of total variance for each factor and at least four variables per factor.

The solution that achieved the above criteria was the one with three factors,

getting close to the results of Nebenzahl et al.[22] In this case, the three factors explain together 46 per cent of total variance. Table 1 shows the rotated component matrix, with the omission of factor loadings smaller than 0.30, in order to ease the reading.

It can be verified, in Table 1 that the variable 'cares about quality' loads with the same intensity in two different factors (0.509). Thus, this variable was excluded from the analyses. Moreover, the variable 'is a gambler' has a weak relation with the factors, showing a factor load of only 0.391 in Factor 3. Therefore, this variable was also excluded. Next, the reliability of the results was evaluated. In this research, the internal consistency was evaluated by the Cronbach α. According to Hair et al,[40] the lower limit for the Cronbach α is 0.70, although it can fall to 0.60 in exploratory researches.

As seen in Table 1, Factor 1 has 10 variables. It explains 25.99 per cent of the total elements' variance (α equals to 0.852, it can be considered reliable). There is no improvement in the internal consistency when some items are excluded from Factor 1. It has to be noticed that the composition of this factor is exactly the same one of the dimension called for Nebenzahl et al[22] as 'Underdog'. Only the variable 'Is a gambler' is not present in Factor, but the same one was discarded from the analyses, as it did not load strongly in any factor. Therefore, Factor 1 will also be called as 'Underdog'.

Factor 2 has eight variables (already excluding the variable 'cares about quality'), as shown in Table 1. It explains 13.05 per cent of the total variance (α equals to 0.83). When comparing the elements of Factor 2 with the dimension 'Quality and Satisfaction Seeker', it is observed that the factor is almost the same. It only lacks the variables 'Demands high quality' and 'Products I'll be proud to show my friends', which are part of Factor 3 in this research.

Table 1: Rotated component matrix

Variables: Chinese household products are … A person who buys Chinese household products …	Factor loadings		
Is a lower class person	**0.761**	—	—
Is stupid, foolish	**0.754**	—	—
Is a poor person	**0.707**	—	—
Is unthinking, rash, naive	**0.662**	—	—
Is mistaken in choosing the product	**0.620**	—	—
Will be dissatisfied	**0.608**	0.340	—
Is not knowledgeable about the product	**0.598**	0.350	—
Is stingy	**0.574**	—	—
Is getting ripped off	**0.566**	—	—
Does not care about quality	**0.551**	—	0.340
Is getting a good deal	—	**0.764**	—
Is correct in choosing the product	—	**0.763**	—
Will be satisfied	—	**0.678**	—
Products my friends would not buy	—	**0.629**	—
Is making the best choice	—	**0.623**	—
High quality products	—	**0.571**	0.401
Is knowledgeable about the product	—	**0.556**	—
Cares about quality	—	**0.509**	0.509
Products I like	—	**0.462**	0.321
Expensive products	—	—	**0.688**
Is buying a good but expensive product	—	—	**0.679**
Inexpensive products	—	—	**0.638**
Is paying top price for top quality	—	—	**0.594**
Demands high quality	—	0.363	**0.585**
Looks for established brand names	—	—	**0.499**
Products I will be proud to show my friends	—	—	**0.481**
Is a gambler	—	—	**0.391**

Note: The bold values represent the factor loadings, which are an indication of the relationship between the variables and the factors.

Owing to the similarities between the dimensions, Factor 2 also will be called 'Quality and Satisfaction Seeker'.

Finally, Factor 3 has seven variables (already excluding the variable 'is a gambler'), explaining 6.55 per cent of the total variance of the elements. This factor can be considered reliable (α is 0.738). As explained in the previous paragraph, two variables that originally belonged to the dimension 'Quality and Satisfaction Seeker' of Nebenzahl *et al*,[22] in this research are part of Factor 3. However, all other variables are the ones observed in the dimension called by the aforementioned authors as 'Economic Value Seeker'. Thus, Factor 3 will be called this way.

In order to evaluate the groups of respondents with respect to the image they have about China, it is necessary to create composed measures from the factor analysis results. The mean ranks of the variables

comprising the factors were computed. Considering these new variables (the evaluations that participants have about China) as a gathering basis, a cluster analysis was used, classifying the respondents of the research in a way that each element is very similar to others within the same group.

Firstly, a hierarchical cluster analysis was performed, in order to identify the ideal number of respondents groups. The gathering method was the Ward one and the distance measure was the squared Euclidean one. When analyzing the agglomeration coefficients, it was verified that the ideal number of clusters is two. Above this number, the coefficients values do not present great increases.

Next, a K-means non-hierarchical cluster analysis was used, in such a way to get a better composition of the two identified groups. In this new analysis the number of cases found in each cluster was 98 in cluster

Table 2: Variable averages for each group

Groups	Underdog	Quality and satisfaction seeker	Economic value seeker
1	4.76	6.69	7.96
2	3.22	5.01	6.69

1 and 103 in cluster 2. To interpret the groups, it is necessary to watch the values that respondents attributed to each one of the three variables used as an agglomeration basis. Table 2 shows the means for each group.

It appears that the respondents belonging to the two groups attach higher scores to the 'Economic Value Seeker' dimension and lower scores to the 'Underdog' one. Thus, one can conclude that respondents believe that people who buy Chinese home appliances are more related to the 'Underdog' dimension, as this was the dimension that received the closest scores to the number 1 (which represented 'I totally agreed'). In a general way, people who buy Chinese home appliances are considered stupid, not knowledgeable about the product, with low purchasing power, potentially being misled into buying these products and, therefore, will be dissatisfied with the purchase.

However, there are some differences between the groups. Group 2 has the worst ratings of China (presenting lower scores to the 'Underdog' dimension, agreeing that people that buy Chinese home appliances are more related to this dimension). Group 1 presents higher scores for the dimensions 'Economic Value Seeker' and 'Quality and Satisfaction Seeker', which means they strongly disagree with the statements that people who buy Chinese home appliances are getting a good deal, buying products of high quality and will be satisfied, or that they are paying a high price in exchange of good quality, purchasing products that would make their friends proud.

Thus, it is observed that both groups assess the Chinese products in a negative fashion, but each group does so for different reasons. The two groups are formed, mostly, by men (65.3 per cent of men in group 1 and 70.9 per cent in group 2) and the average age of members is close in each group (36.3 years in group 1 and 35.7 years in group 2). Therefore, an explanation for the differences in the reasons for a negative evaluation of Chinese products may not be observed in the respondents' demographics.

Moreover, considering the groups' answers to questions related to their personal values' importance, it is seen that there are also no differences between the groups: for both, it is more important to conduct themselves well vis-à-vis society, in accordance with the social rules of interaction, in comparison with other values. Finally, it was noticed that people from group 2 are slightly more familiar with China than people from group 1. Therefore, people more familiar with China may consider elements related to the country's economic development, to the working force specialization degree, and to human rights aspects, when they evaluate products made in the country, leading to a worse evaluation of the country's products.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

This article aimed to study the evaluations toward a country image, identifying groups of consumers with different underlying reasons for these evaluations. Despite the growing importance of China in the international scenario, this study showed that the Chinese home appliances image is still negative, and it identified two groups of respondents with different assessments. The bad evaluations are because of different scores attributed to the image dimensions named as 'Underdog', 'Economic Value Seeker' and 'Quality and Satisfaction Seeker'. For group 1, people who buy Chinese home appliances are not seeking economic value or high quality, whereas for

group 2, more familiarized with China, people who buy Chinese home appliances are stupid, poor, not knowledgeable and potentially being misled.

It can be observed a similarity between the three dimensions of country image derived from the sample used and the ones found by Nebenzahl *et al*,[22] which suggests a theoretical support for the results. As a practical implication of this research's findings, it seems to indicate that Chinese companies who commercialize products in Brazil should perform important adjustments in their marketing programs. Segmentation and positioning strategies will take an important and starting role in this matter. Thus, Chinese companies that are interested in marketing their products in Brazil should develop special strategic policies, with the goal of reducing the negative views that consumers have with respect to Chinese products. More researches have to be taken before launching any Chinese product in Brazil, especially qualitative ones, in order to understand the consumers' deepest feelings and rationales.

As to the methodological limitations of this research, it is worth highlighting that the target population defined for this study does not cover other important purchasing segments of foreign products, like professionals and affluent consumers, resident in other regions in Brazil (and not just in the State of Sao Paulo). In this regard, the results found cannot be generalized to all segments of Brazilian people, because of the very specific nature of the sample used.

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