

Imitation as an Innovation Strategy: Evidence from the Colombian Chocolate and Confectionery Sector

 Angela Victoria Arenas-Duque*

 Giovanni Enrique Valencia-Zuñiga**

 José Londoño-Cardozo***

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Abstract

This study explores imitation as an innovation strategy within Colombia's chocolate and confectionery sector, aiming to understand its role in strengthening competitiveness and organizational adaptability. Using a qualitative approach, the research employed semi-structured interviews with representatives from the four largest Colombian multinational companies in the sector, all of which have international operations. The analysis applied hermeneutic methods to examine how imitation, innovation, and information protection interact in shaping business strategies. Findings reveal that imitation is not perceived as mere replication but as a conscious, structured practice that reduces risks, optimizes re-sources, and accelerates product development through adaptation and differentiation. The study highlights that firms integrate imitation with customer-centered innovation, team-based collaboration, and systematic processes while safeguarding intellectual property through confidentiality agreements, patents, and strategic timing. Despite its strategic relevance, imitation remains linguistically and symbolically marginalized, often replaced by terms such as "strategic adaptation" to avoid negative connotations. The research contributes to organizational theory by illustrating how firms in emerging economies reinterpret innovation beyond radical invention, emphasizing pragmatic, ethical, and con-text-specific approaches that balance creativity, competitiveness, and knowledge protection. These findings suggest the need for policy frameworks, academic curricula, and managerial practices that recognize imitation as a legitimate pathway to innovation.

Keywords: imitation; innovation strategy; competitive advantage; knowledge protection; organizational adaptation; Colombian confectionery sector.

* Universidad del Valle (Cali, Colombia). Email: arenas.angela@correounivalle.edu.co

** Universidad del Valle (Cali, Colombia). Email: giovanny.valencia@correounivalle.edu.co

*** Universidad del Valle (Cali, Colombia). Email: jose.david.londono@correounivalle.edu.co

La imitación como estrategia de innovación: evidencia del sector colombiano del chocolate y la confitería

Resumen

Este estudio analiza la imitación como estrategia de innovación en el sector colombiano del chocolate y la confitería, con el propósito de comprender su papel en el fortalecimiento de la competitividad y la adaptabilidad organizacional. Desde un enfoque cualitativo, la investigación empleó entrevistas semiestructuradas con representantes de las cuatro mayores empresas multinacionales de origen colombiano del sector, todas con presencia internacional. El análisis se desarrolló mediante métodos hermenéuticos para examinar la relación entre imitación, innovación y protección de la información en la configuración de las estrategias empresariales. Los hallazgos muestran que la imitación no se entiende como simple réplica, sino como una práctica consciente y estructurada que reduce riesgos, optimiza recursos y acelera el desarrollo de productos por medio de procesos de adaptación y diferenciación. Asimismo, se evidencia que las empresas articulan la imitación con la innovación centrada en el cliente, el trabajo colaborativo y procesos sistemáticos, al tiempo que resguardan su conocimiento mediante acuerdos de confidencialidad, patentes y ventajas temporales. El estudio aporta a la teoría organizacional al mostrar que, en economías emergentes, la innovación también puede construirse a partir de la reinterpretación estratégica de referentes existentes, lo que plantea la necesidad de reconocer la imitación como una vía legítima de innovación.

Palabras clave: imitación; estrategia de innovación; ventaja competitiva; protección del conocimiento; adaptación organizacional; sector confitero colombiano.

A imitação como estratégia de inovação: evidências do setor colombiano do chocolate e da confeitaria

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a imitação como estratégia de inovação no setor colombiano do chocolate e da confeitaria, com o objetivo de compreender o seu papel no fortalecimento da competitividade e da adaptabilidade organizacional. A partir de uma abordagem qualitativa, a pesquisa utilizou entrevistas semiestructuradas com representantes das quatro maiores empresas multinacionais de origem colombiana do setor, todas com presença internacional. A análise foi desenvolvida por meio de métodos hermenéuticos para examinar a relação entre imitação, inovação e proteção da informação na configuração das estratégias empresariais. Os achados mostram que a imitação não é compreendida como uma simples réplica, mas como uma prática consciente e estruturada que reduz riscos, otimiza recursos e acelera o desenvolvimento de produtos, por meio de processos de adaptação e diferenciação. Também se observa que as empresas articulam a imitação com a inovação centrada no cliente, o trabalho colaborativo, e processos sistemáticos, ao mesmo tempo em que protegem seu conhecimento por meio de acordos de confidencialidade, patentes e vantagens temporárias. O estudo contribui para a teoria organizacional, ao demonstrar que, em economias emergentes, a inovação também pode ser construída a partir da reinterpretção estratégica de referências existentes, o que indica a necessidade de reconhecer a imitação como uma via legítima de inovação.

Palavras-chave: imitação; estratégia de inovação; vantagem competitiva; proteção do conhecimento; adaptação organizacional; setor colombiano de confeitaria.

Introduction

Innovation has been approached from multiple disciplines as a central process in the evolution of organizations. The literature acknowledges that it is not limited to the invention of entirely new products but also encompasses the adaptation, enhancement, and re-configuration of existing solutions. Schumpeter (1934) defined innovation as the introduction of new goods, production methods, sources of supply, markets, or industrial organizations, asserting that such practices constitute a key driver of economic change. Along similar lines, the OECD (2005) conceptualizes innovation as the implementation of a new or significantly improved product or process, as well as new organizational and marketing methods. More recent perspectives, such as those advanced by Tidd and Bessant (2020), argue that innovation involves translating ideas and knowledge into solutions that create value not only in business contexts but also at the societal level. This broad understanding has led to the recognition of multiple forms of innovation, including organizational, process, and marketing innovation, as well as the growing relevance of imitation as a deliberate strategy.

In this context, imitation has shifted from being understood as a mere passive replication to being regarded as a strategic mechanism that enables organizations to reduce uncertainty, save resources, and accelerate incremental innovation processes. Schnaars (1994) contends that imitators can achieve competitive advantages comparable to those of pioneers while incurring lower risks and costs. Chesbrough (2003) argues that imitation can complement open innovation by allowing existing products to be modified and adapted to specific contexts. Scholars such as Hu et al. (2017) and Wang and Wang (2020) reinforce this notion by framing imitation as a creative process in which firms reinterpret existing solutions through technological absorption capabilities. From an organizational theory standpoint, March and Olsen (1976) introduced the concept of organizational imitation as a form of adaptation under uncertainty, while DiMaggio and Powell (1999) described isomorphism as a logic driving organizations to resemble one another due to coercive, normative, or mimetic pressures. This perspective aligns with the work of Hannan and Freeman (2009), who argue that organizational survival depends not only on radical innovation but also on selection, variation, and imitation within competitive environments.

In the specific case of the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector, these dynamics acquire particular significance. This industry is characterized by diverse offerings, intense competition, and constant pressure from both domestic and international actors. The similarities in products, packaging, and positioning strategies reveal patterns of imitation that cannot be solely attributed to creative limitations but rather to strategic decisions aimed at sustaining competitiveness. This logic intensifies in a context where traditional festivities, urban growth, and rising disposable income have expanded the market, while increasing consumer demands have compelled firms to incorporate innovations focused on health, sustainability, and differentiation. Informes de Expertos (2025) and Rivera Godoy et al. (2022) have documented how this industry is marked by dynamism, financial fluctuations, and the capacity to generate economic value even under conditions of high variability.

The general objective of this research is to analyze product imitation as an innovation strategy and its impact on the competitiveness of Colombian firms in the chocolate and confectionery sector. Two specific objectives were established: first, to evaluate the forms of imitation employed by these firms, considering their strategic benefits and risks; and second, to contrast the sector's actual practices with existing theoretical approaches to imitation as a form of organizational innovation. This dual perspective enables a comprehensive understanding of both current practices and theoretical rationales underpinning them, situating the analysis within a framework that both contextualizes and critically examines the phenomenon.

Methodologically, a qualitative approach was adopted as it is particularly suitable for studying complex organizational phenomena whose understanding requires the interpretation of discourses, meanings, and rationalities. Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on measuring variables and generalizing results, qualitative methods allow for an in-depth exploration of how organizational actors construct strategic decisions within specific contexts. In this case, the aim was not only to identify whether firms imitate but also to investigate how, why, and with what consequences they engage in such practices. This perspective aligns with the need to interpret the ways organizations configure their strategies under conditions of uncertainty, competition, and institutional pressure.

The research design was structured around a case study focusing on the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector. This industry was selected due to its economic

relevance, the presence of firms with visible imitation practices, and its strategic importance within the national economy. According to Yin (2003), case study methodology is well suited for analyzing contemporary phenomena in depth, especially when these cannot be isolated from their contextual realities. In this case, the analysis examined how firms adopt, adapt, or replicate existing strategies and products not as a mechanical reaction but as a deliberate effort to remain competitive and relevant.

Data collection was conducted through semi structured interviews with product managers from leading firms in the sector. These individuals occupy key roles in the processes of product development, refinement, differentiation, and market positioning. Their perspectives provided access to the strategic decisions underpinning imitation, both in its explicit forms and in its more implicit or normalized manifestations within organizational logic. The semi structured format balanced the direction provided by the interview guide with the flexibility to explore emergent themes, thus enabling a richer understanding of the phenomenon. The data were analyzed using discourse analysis techniques, which facilitated the identification of narratives, interpretative frameworks, and justifications employed by interviewees to legitimize or question imitation in their daily practices.

The findings reveal that imitation within the sector is neither homogeneous nor limited to literal product copying. Firms employ diverse forms of imitation ranging from direct replication to strategic adaptation of external elements, including practices such as “tropicalization” and the enhancement of foreign products. This variety can be explained by factors such as access to market information, pressure to innovate with limited resources, and the need to respond to local preferences. The interviews demonstrate that product managers do not perceive imitation as an inferior or secondary activity compared to original innovation. On the contrary, they view it as a legitimate means of achieving competitive advantage, reducing investment risks, and accelerating product development processes. This perspective resonates with the work of Lieberman and Asaba (2006), who distinguish between information based and rivalry driven forms of imitation.

Another relevant finding is that imitation does not occur in isolation but within an organizational field where practices mutually reinforce each other. The mimetic isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell (1999) is evident in the tendency of firms to replicate the strategies of actors perceived as successful, thereby generating a certain

degree of homogeneity in the market offering. However, this process does not preclude differentiation, as many firms combine imitative elements with incremental innovations to maintain a recognizable brand identity. The strategic use of imitation, therefore, does not exclude creativity but can coexist with it as part of an adaptive organizational logic.

The conclusions of this research reinforce the idea that imitation can serve as a viable organizational strategy for value creation, provided it is undertaken in an informed, ethical, and context sensitive manner. Firms in the analyzed sector do not imitate merely because of innovation capability constraints but rather as part of a strategic calculation shaped by an environment that rewards speed, efficiency, and alignment with consumer expectations. In this sense, imitation can be understood as a form of situated innovation that responds to real market conditions and specific organizational dynamics.

The remainder of the document is organized into five sections. First, the theoretical framework is presented, addressing the concepts of innovation, imitation, and their organizational implications. Second, the sectoral context of the Colombian chocolate and confectionery industry is described. Third, the research methodology is detailed, including the approach, methods, and data collection and analysis techniques. Fourth, the study's findings are presented based on the established analytical categories. Finally, conclusions are discussed, along with implications for future research and organizational practice.

Theoretical Framework

Conceptions and Typologies of Innovation in the Organizational Context

Innovation has been examined from diverse perspectives. Schumpeter (1934, 1939) defined it as the introduction of new goods, production methods, sources of supply, markets, or organizational forms, linking it to economic change and business development. The OECD (2005) characterized it as the implementation of new or significantly improved products, processes, marketing methods, or organizational practices applicable to goods, services, and internal or external structures. García (2019) described it as a set of improvements aimed

at benefiting the consumer. Oduro (2019) associated it with the transformation of ideas into commercial applications. Zaverzhenets and Lobacz (2021) highlighted its relevance for organizational sustainability and adaptability. Tidd and Bessant (2020) defined innovation as the process of translating ideas into solutions that generate value for the market or society.

A common thread in these definitions lies in the practical application of ideas. Innovation becomes tangible when an organization implements it and derives added value from the process. The European Commission, as cited by Rojo Gutiérrez et al. (2019), observed that innovative organizations introduce disruptions, establish partnerships, secure financing, and expand operations. These same authors emphasized that innovation influences marketing, logistics, and management, enabling firms to optimize resources, reduce costs, and improve quality standards.

The literature identifies various forms of innovation. Product innovation refers to new or improved goods or services (OECD & Eurostat, 2018), whether radical or incremental. Process innovation entails the development of more efficient production or distribution methods. Schilling (2020) viewed this type of innovation as essential for competitiveness, particularly in industrial sectors. Organizational innovation encompasses transformations in structures and management practices. Tidd and Bessant (2020) argued that such changes strengthen organizational responsiveness and adaptability. Marketing innovation involves the introduction of new methods for presenting or promoting products. Kotler and Keller (2016) underscored its value for market positioning without necessarily altering the product itself.

Chesbrough (2003) introduced the concept of open innovation, grounded in the exchange of knowledge with external actors. This approach accelerates development processes, reduces risks, and expands market opportunities. In the social sphere, Mulgan et al. (2007) noted that social innovation addresses collective challenges, aiming for positive impact beyond profitability. Kerzner (2022) identified additional typologies, including continuous, discontinuous, incremental, radical, closed, and open innovation, all summarized in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Types of Innovation

Source: Author's elaboration based on Kerzner (2022).

Another pathway for innovation is strategic imitation. Gawer and Cusumano (2014) argued that follower firms can achieve advantages comparable to those of pioneers while avoiding initial development costs. In volatile or emerging contexts, this approach allows firms to mitigate risks and accelerate market entry. Hu et al. (2017) indicated that imitation enables organizations to reinterpret existing solutions, while Wang and Wang (2020) observed that many imitator firms develop technological and learning capabilities to adapt products or processes to specific contexts.

Imitation as an Organizational Innovation Strategy

Imitation has been recognized as a valid innovation strategy within organizational contexts. This approach has been examined through multiple theoretical perspectives, spanning both

economic theory and institutional analysis. Schnaars (1994, p. 42) argued that “imitators often can obtain the same competitive advantages as innovators, but at lower development and research costs,” highlighting its strategic value in resource constrained environments. In such contexts, imitation reduces risks and accelerates adaptation processes without requiring radical innovation efforts.

Chesbrough (2003) suggested that imitation can complement open innovation. He posited that firms can not only replicate existing products but also modify and enhance them in ways that create value both for themselves and for consumers. This perspective reframes imitation as a process that goes beyond mere reproduction, encompassing the transformation and optimization of existing solutions to fit new contexts.

Imitation is also linked to processes of incremental innovation. Spithoven et al. (2011) argued that organizations engaging in strategic imitation invest in research and adaptation. Although they build existing models, such firms generate products tailored to emerging demands without relying on entirely original developments. In this sense, imitation functions as a catalyst for organizational efficiency and learning.

Nian (2004) conceptualized imitative innovation as a structured process, contending that this strategy does not simply involve copying but rather adapting innovations to specific organizational settings. He proposed a three-stage approach: issue definition, method selection, and development, as depicted in Figure 2.

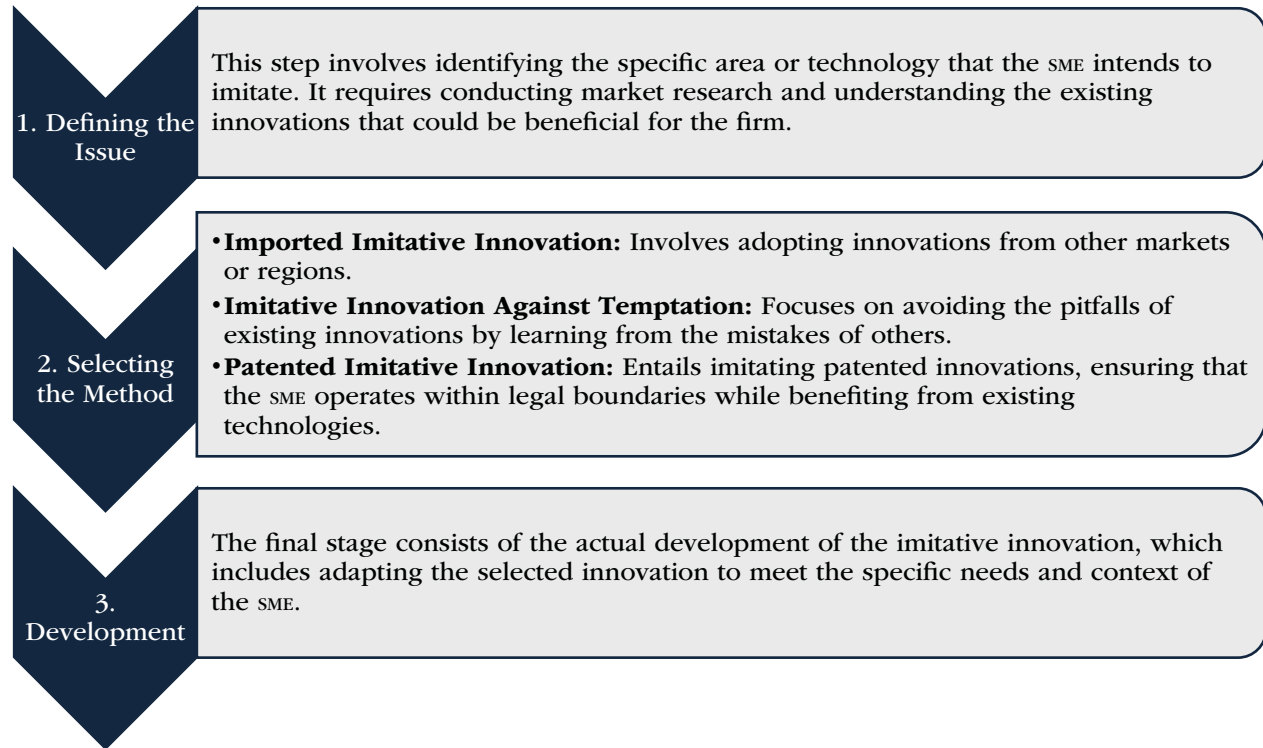


Figure 2. Steps in the Imitative Innovation Process

Source: Author's elaboration based on Nian (2004).

In the first stage, the organization identifies the area or technology it intends to imitate, which requires understanding the innovations available in the market. The second stage involves selecting the type of imitative innovation: imported, error avoiding, or patent based. Imported imitation entails adopting solutions from other contexts; the second type seeks to avoid repeating mistakes from failed innovations; the third focuses on leveraging patented inventions within legal boundaries. The third stage corresponds to the implementation and final adaptation of the selected innovation.

Organizational theory has also examined imitation as a mechanism for adaptation and legitimacy. March and Olsen (1976) defined organizational imitation as the process by which organizations replicate practices perceived as successful in similar environments. This adoption is driven not only by technical criteria but also by social pressures promoting homogeneity across organizational structures.

This phenomenon is explained through the concept of organizational isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1999) and Meyer and Rowan (1977) identified three types of pressures leading to imitation: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism stems from external demands such as regulations or standards. Normative isomorphism arises when organizations adopt professional norms to gain legitimacy. Mimetic isomorphism emerges in uncertain contexts, where organizations imitate successful models to reduce ambiguity. In all cases, imitation relates to institutional learning and the quest for legitimacy within the organizational field.

Bolomope et al. (2022), Freitas (2023), and Ganga et al. (2017) expanded upon this typology to explain how organizations replicate models that yield better results in similar contexts. These institutionalized practices are not always adopted for reasons of efficiency but often because of their social acceptability. Imitation thus becomes a strategy for ensuring organizational viability under conditions of uncertainty.

From the perspective of organizational ecology, Hannan and Freeman (2009) analyzed imitative behavior as part of processes of variation, selection, and retention. Organizations face structural constraints that limit their capacity to respond to changing environments. Consequently, they imitate practices that have already demonstrated success. Amburgey and Rao (1996) and Singh and Lumsden (1990) supported this view, arguing that imitation increases survival chances when opportunities for experimentation are limited.

This process, however, does not guarantee equivalent outcomes. Hannan and Freeman (2009) cautioned that not all organizations can replicate the effects of imitated practices due to variations in resources and capabilities. Nevertheless, adopting legitimized models can generate symbolic benefits that facilitate access to external resources. In such cases, the value of imitation lies in both efficiency and legitimacy.

Lieberman and Asaba (2006) offered an alternative perspective rooted in strategic rationality. They contended that imitation may stem from two types of motivation: informational and competitive. Under information-based theories, organizations replicate others' decisions when facing uncertainty or lacking sufficient information. Under rivalry-based theories, firms imitate competitors to maintain equilibrium in the market. In both cases, imitation reduces risks and minimizes strategic errors.

On the informational side, the authors highlighted the phenomenon of information cascades, whereby social actors adopt previously validated behaviors without analyzing their own internal data. This pattern institutionalizes practices that, although imitated, are perceived as rational. On the competitive side, they observed that organizations imitate maintaining their position vis à vis rivals, replicating strategic moves to avoid competitive disadvantages. This practice also functions as a protective mechanism against abrupt environmental changes.

Barney (1991) analyzed imitation from the standpoint of resource-based theory, asserting that sustainable competitive advantage depends on resources being valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. He noted that some assets, such as physical tools, are easily imitated. In contrast, intangible assets like reputation, organizational culture, or internal systems are more difficult to replicate due to their social complexity. As a result, certain forms of innovation, particularly those grounded in teamwork and accumulated knowledge, are more resistant to direct imitation.

Within this framework, Cohen and Levinthal (1990) introduced the concept of absorptive capacity, defined as an organization's ability to identify, assimilate, and exploit external knowledge. They argued that mere exposure to external innovations does not guarantee their effective use. Organizations require prior knowledge to recognize opportunities, adapt technologies, and derive benefits. They stated that "knowledge is assumed to be useful to the firm because it increases the firm's knowledge while decreasing that of the competition" (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990, p. 141). Thus, imitation is effective only when structured learning processes transform observed practices into organizational value.

This interpretation can be further extended through the lens of dynamic capabilities, understood as the organization's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies in changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). From this perspective, strategic imitation goes beyond the mere adoption of successful benchmarks and involves the capacity to identify opportunities in the environment, leverage available knowledge, and transform it into contextually relevant organizational responses. Teece (2010) argues that these capabilities are expressed through processes of sensing, seizing, and transforming, which allows imitation to be understood as a source of competitive value not because of replication itself, but because of the firm's ability to interpret market signals,

select relevant learning, and reconfigure its resources, processes, or products according to its specific conditions.

In the same direction, subsequent studies have shown that dynamic capabilities can be observed through more concrete components, such as opportunity recognition, learning and absorptive capacity, internal integration, reconfiguration, and innovation (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, 2010; Wang & Ahmed, 2007). This approach is particularly relevant for the analysis of imitation, as it frames it as an active organizational practice grounded in environmental scanning, the assimilation of external knowledge, and its transformation into market-adapted solutions. Similarly, Londoño-Cardozo et al. (2025) emphasize that these capabilities materialize through processes of opportunity sensing, learning, integration, reconfiguration, and innovation, reinforcing the idea that strategic imitation can constitute a manifestation of dynamic capabilities when organizations do not replicate mechanically but instead adapt, combine, and reorient resources and knowledge to sustain competitiveness.

Cohen et al. (2000) extended this analysis to examine innovation protection mechanisms. They observed that organizations rely not only on patents but also on trade secrets, first mover advantages, and complementary capabilities in marketing and manufacturing. While patents can block competitors and generate licensing revenues, their usefulness may be constrained by cost considerations and the potential disclosure of strategic information. In industries where imitation is technically feasible, firms often favor more flexible mechanisms such as trade secrets, particularly when processes are difficult to observe or replicate.

Mezzanotti and Simcoe (2023), as well as Thomä and Bizer (2013), further examined the role of trade secrets as an effective alternative to formal intellectual property protection. This mechanism is particularly valuable in industries where differentiation stems from accumulated experience or internal team dynamics. In such cases, imitation encounters not only legal barriers but also cultural and operational obstacles.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore that imitation should not be understood as a passive activity but rather as a deliberate strategy for adaptation, optimization, and learning. Imitation does not necessarily seek to reproduce existing practices exactly as they are; instead, it often aims to reinterpret, transform, and apply proven solutions in new

contexts. Under conditions of uncertainty, intense competition, or resource constraints, imitation can constitute a legitimate and effective pathway to achieving strategic objectives.

Product Imitation as an Innovation Strategy in the Colombian Context

Analyzing product imitation as an innovation strategy in the Colombian context—particularly within the chocolate and confectionery sector—offers a valuable opportunity to understand adaptive business dynamics in developing economies. Rather than focusing exclusively on invention, many firms adopt innovation models grounded in external learning and the reconfiguration of existing ideas. This approach enables them to reduce experimentation costs and accelerate their response times to market shifts (Bell & Pavitt, 1993). Such a perspective is particularly relevant in industries like food production, where flavor, packaging, or brand storytelling can be differentiated through adjustments to established formulas without necessarily resorting to radical innovations.

The Colombian context adds an important dimension to this analysis, as small and medium sized enterprises (SMES)—which dominate much of the sector—often operate under constraints related to financial resources, technological capabilities, and access to international markets (Álvarez & López, 2015). For these firms, intelligently imitating products already validated in other markets can not only reduce the risks of failure but also constitute a legitimate form of innovation oriented toward survival and growth. Moreover, in markets where the consumption of chocolate and confectionery products is expanding, as is currently the case in Colombia, adapting international trends can provide a faster route to competitiveness.

Recent research on innovation in developing countries indicates that adaptive innovation represents an underestimated yet effective means of creating value because it requires firms to observe, adapt to local cultural contexts, and respond swiftly to consumer demands (Cimoli et al., 2009). In this sense, Colombian firms can employ imitation not as mere replication but as a strategic tool to build sustainable competitive advantages grounded in contextual knowledge and product customization. Therefore, analyzing this strategy from an academic perspective not only broadens the conceptualization of innovation but

also helps identify efficient solutions to enhance productivity and competitiveness in traditional sectors of the national economy.

Conceptions and Typologies of Innovation in the Organizational Context

The confectionery market in Colombia has experienced sustained growth, driven by socio-cultural and economic factors. The increasing demand for sweet products, particularly those with distinctive attributes or superior quality, reflects both consumer dynamics associated with traditional festivities and structural transformations in the broader environment, including urbanization and rising disposable incomes in urban areas.

Technological innovation has also played a key role in the sector's evolution. Companies have incorporated advances aimed at producing confectionery with reduced sugar content, sustainable packaging, and functional products, thereby enhancing their competitiveness in response to emerging market demands (Informes de Expertos, 2025).

In terms of portfolio structure, the dominant segment consists of sugar confectionery, which includes candies, gummies, chewing gum, nougat, and lollipops, all holding a significant market share. This is followed, to a lesser extent, by chocolate products, snack bars, and other confectionery categories, such as dietary, functional, or hard-to-classify items, among which mixed or innovative proposals are grouped. This distribution clearly reflects Colombian consumers' preference for traditional products while leaving room for emerging niches with growth potential.

The market also exhibits a high concentration of business participation. Among the most prominent players are Súper de Alimentos, Colombina S.A., Mondelēz International, Grupo Nutresa, and Ferrero, followed by companies such as Aldor, Hershey Co., Nestlé S.A., Canels Group, Sweetcol, and Dulces La Americana. These firms compete across different confectionery categories, employing diversification, brand positioning, and distribution optimization strategies to sustain market share (Informes de Expertos, 2025).

From a financial perspective, the industry is characterized by variability in sales, assets, and net income. Rivera Godoy et al. (2022) explained that such fluctuations largely depend

on organizations' capacity to manage costs and operating expenses efficiently. Favorable economic performance is achieved when resource management generates returns exceeding the cost of capital, a clear indicator of value creation.

When compared with similar firms in other emerging economies, the Colombian industry demonstrates advantages in terms of return per monetary unit invested, indicating substantial competitive potential in international markets (Rivera Godoy et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the sector faces structural challenges stemming from competitive pressures at both local and global levels, shifts in consumer preferences, and economic uncertainty. These factors compel firms to adopt flexible strategic approaches that emphasize adaptability and sustained innovation.

Within this context, analyzing the Colombian confectionery sector becomes particularly relevant given its competitive dynamism, where the production and commercialization of similar products have become common practice. The replication of formats, packaging, flavors, and proven concepts is widespread in the industry. This phenomenon reflects not only a commercial survival strategy but also an underlying economic rationale. The strategy of imitating successful products from international markets and adapting them to local conditions—through modifications in formulation, presentation, or positioning—emerges as an efficient form of innovation. Such creative imitation enables firms to reduce investments in research and development while maintaining differentiation and ensuring agile responses to consumer demands.

Materials and Methods

Study Type

This research adopts a qualitative approach, consistent with the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. The methodological choice reflects the interest in understanding imitation as an innovation strategy within a specific organizational context: the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector. Far from limiting itself to a superficial description of

events, the qualitative methodology enables access to the underlying logics shaping the decisions, practices, and meanings that organizational actors attribute to their business experience (Bernal-Torres, 2010; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015).

Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on the measurement and generalization of variables, the qualitative perspective privileges the in-depth understanding of complex social processes (Dodgson, 2017; Mills & Birks, 2014). In this case, the goal is not merely to identify the existence of imitative strategies but to explore how they are constructed, what motivations drive them, how they are perceived by organizational actors, and what effects they generate in terms of innovation and competitiveness. This perspective is particularly relevant when the object of study involves subjective, contextual, and dynamic dimensions, as is the case with strategic decision-making processes in highly competitive industries (Bluhm et al., 2011; Vergara Varela, 2024).

The exploratory and interpretive nature of the qualitative methodology makes it well suited to addressing the study's specific objectives. On one hand, it enables the evaluation of the forms of imitation employed by firms, along with the benefits and risks associated with such practices, by incorporating the perspectives of actors directly involved in the process. On the other hand, it facilitates the comparison of the sector's actual behavior with existing theoretical frameworks, identifying convergences, divergences, or context specific adaptations. In this sense, the qualitative approach not only provides analytical depth but also generates contextualized knowledge that engages critically with theoretical perspectives (Martínez, 2024).

Furthermore, the qualitative approach is appropriate for studying phenomena whose manifestations are not always explicit or formalized, as is often the case with strategic imitation. Many such practices evolve implicitly or adaptively, requiring methods capable of capturing meanings beyond normative statements or documentary records. Through techniques such as interviewing, researchers can identify patterns, tensions, dilemmas, and rationalities that would remain inaccessible through highly structured or standardized instruments.

Research Method

This study adopts the case study as its methodological approach, focusing on the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector. Within this framework, the participating firms are not treated as independent cases but as units of observation that enable the understanding of strategic imitation from different organizational positions within the same industry field. This methodological approach allows for an in-depth examination of a specific context that exemplifies complex organizational practices, such as strategic imitation linked to innovation processes (Tello-Castrillón, 2024). Yin (2003) argues that the case study is particularly valuable when the aim is to answer *how* or *why* questions in settings where the phenomenon cannot be clearly separated from its context. Accordingly, the chosen method reflects the interest in understanding how imitation manifests within a particular industrial environment and what its implications are for innovation and business competitiveness. Accordingly, the findings do not seek statistical generalization but rather aim to provide an analytical understanding of the phenomenon within a specific industry context.

The selected case is justified by the structural and competitive conditions that characterize the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector. It is an industry of economic relevance, marked by the simultaneous presence of domestic and multinational firms and by the continuous circulation of products that share similarities in formulation, presentation, packaging, or value proposition. These conditions create an environment suitable for examining imitation not as an isolated or accidental response, but as a recurring organizational practice articulated with processes of adaptation, differentiation, and innovation. In this sense, the sector provides a relevant empirical setting to analyze how firms reinterpret existing benchmarks and translate them into strategic decisions aimed at sustaining competitiveness.

Sources of Information

Given the nature of this research, both primary and secondary sources were used. Primary sources consisted of in-depth interviews with product managers from leading firms in the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector. Through their testimonies, access was

gained to strategic decisions related to imitation, both in explicit forms and in their more implicit or normalized manifestations within the sector's competitive dynamics.

Secondary sources included sectoral and theoretical information drawn from academic databases, market analysis documents, and official reports. These materials provided contextualization, facilitated comparisons with empirical findings, and supported the conceptual grounding of the analytical framework.

Data Collection Techniques

To characterize imitation as an innovation strategy in the Colombian chocolate and confectionery industry, interviews were selected as the primary data collection technique. This decision was based on the need to capture perceptions, motivations, and experiences that could not be adequately explored through structured instruments. Díaz-Bravo et al. (2013) noted that interviews enable richer data collection by providing direct access to participants' narratives, resolving ambiguities in real time, and tailoring the communication process to each specific case.

A semi structured interview format was chosen because it balances structure with flexibility. Fernández Nogales (2004) and Malhotra (2008) highlighted that this format maintains a guiding framework without constraining the exploration of emergent issues during the interaction. Similarly, Hammer and Wildavsky (1990) emphasized that this approach allows for a more open conversation without losing thematic focus.

The interviews were conducted digitally, which enhanced logistical efficiency. This modality overcame constraints of time and geographic location, facilitating participants' involvement without compromising the quality of the interaction.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a hermeneutic approach, aimed at the critical and reflective interpretation of interview discourses. This process involved content coding, the development of analytical categories, the comparison among categories, and the identification of patterns across participants' narratives, the reviewed literature, and emerging conclusions.

The approach drew upon the methods proposed by Martínez (2024) and Vergara Varela (2024) for discourse analysis, as well as Londoño-Cardozo & Pineda Henao (2024) for constructing analytical categories.

As noted by scholars such as Abulad (2007), Grondin (2008), and Ángel Pérez (2011), hermeneutics allows not only for description but also for the deeper comprehension of meaning, thus facilitating a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study. For this purpose, Atlas.ti software was used, as it supports the visualization of relationships among categories and concepts (Dueñas Ruiz, 2015). The analytical process employed the codes summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Codes for Data Analysis

Family	Code	Description
Imitation	Isomorphism	Imitation as a strategy for gaining legitimacy in the market.
	Information-Based Theories	Imitation relies on observing the successful decisions of other organizations when internal information is limited or uncertain.
	Rivalry-Based Theories	The status quo is preserved by imitating competitors' moves.
	Risk Minimization	Imitation is adopted as a strategy to avoid errors by following market-tested models.
	100% Replication	Exact copying of successful products, services, or business models.
Innovation	Sustainable Competitive Advantage	Being valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable by equivalent resources.
	Invention	Refers to the creation of entirely new products developed from scratch.
	Imitation as Optimization	Imitation is viewed as a means of saving resources, time, and capital by building upon existing knowledge to improve current processes.
	Customer-Centered Innovation	Focuses on understanding and meeting customer needs to develop new products aligned with their preferences.
	Ethical Imitation vs. Unfair Competition	Imitation must be conducted ethically, involving investment in research and analysis. Copying without transformation or added value constitutes unfair practices.
	Team-Based Innovation	Promotes collaboration and idea generation within teams to drive new product development.
	Systematic Innovation	Implements structured processes and methodologies to foster innovation within the organization.
	Added Value	Taking a product or method, replicating it, and introducing enhancements to give it the company's distinctive identity so that it appears "different" from what already exists in the market.

Continúa

Family	Code	Description
Information Protection	Confidentiality	Safeguarding strategic information derived from research and internal decision-making as a source of competitive advantage
	Patent Protection	Preventing imitation, generating revenue through licensing, strengthening bargaining power in negotiations, mitigating infringement risks, evaluating development performance, and enhancing the firm's reputation
	First-Mover Advantage	Gaining a temporary competitive edge over rivals by accelerating development, execution, and commercialization before imitation occurs.
	Complementary Capabilities in Marketing	Leverage channels, reputation, and market positioning to drive the commercial success of protected or differentiated products

Source: Author's elaboration based on Londoño-Cardozo and Pineda Henao (2024).

Interviewee Profile

A total of five interviews were conducted. First, a pilot interview was carried out with an individual from a different sector to validate the questionnaire and ensure the relevance and focus of the questions. After confirming the instrument's validity, four interviews were conducted with individuals from the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector. These four interviewees represent the largest companies in the sector nationwide, all of which have an international presence and were selected specifically because they belong to Colombian origin multinationals operating in the chocolate and confectionery industry. Among them, one interviewee works in procurement, two in marketing, and one in logistics (see Figure 3).

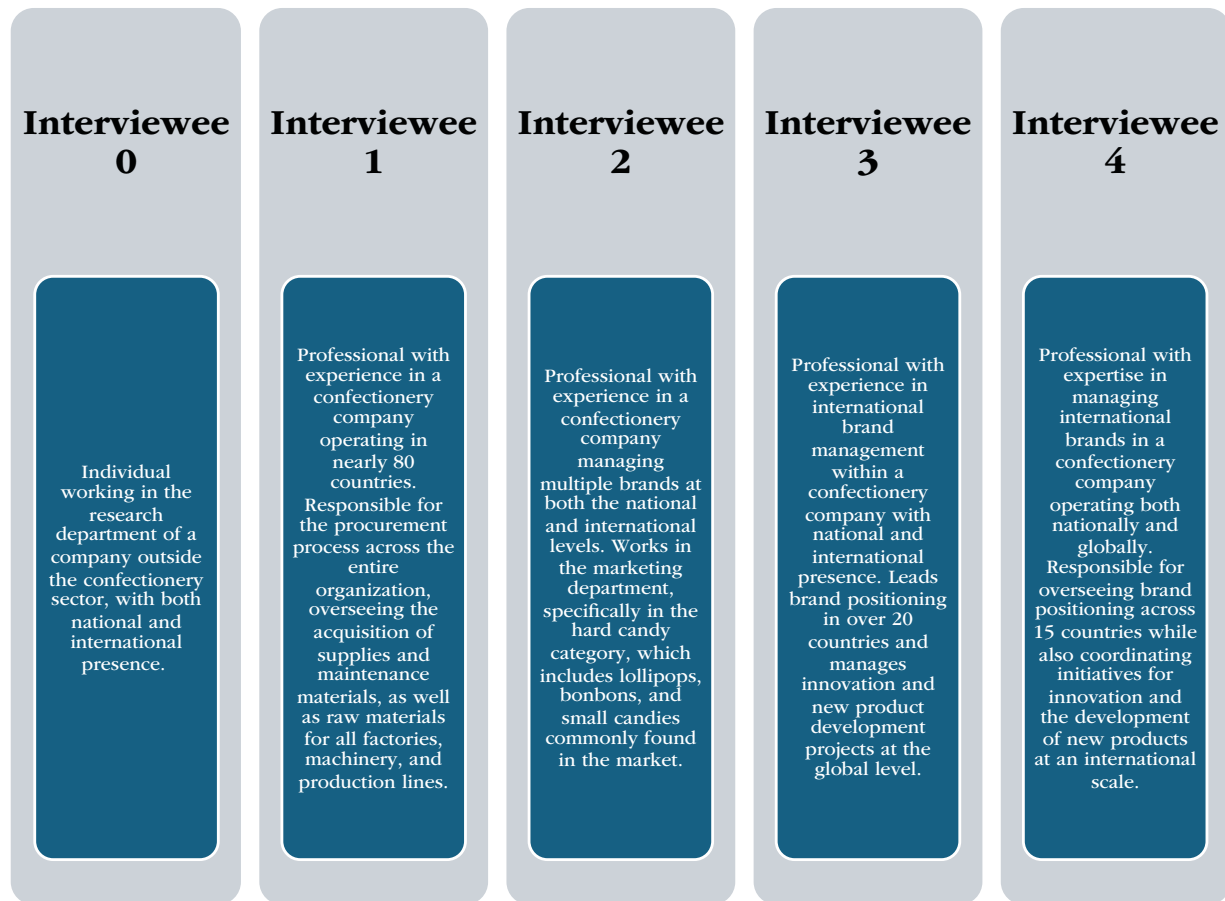


Figure 3. Interviewee Profile

Source: Own elaboration.

Ethical Considerations

At the request of the interviewees, their profiles were anonymized to ensure that the companies for which they work cannot be identified. In addition, the preparation of this manuscript involved the partial assistance of large language models (LLMs), specifically ChatGPT, which were used to support aspects of drafting and syntax refinement. It should be noted, however, that all final decisions regarding the content, structure, and argumentation of the manuscript were made by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the work presented. Furthermore, certain stages of the project also involved the use of SciSpace (PubGenius Inc, 2025) as a support tool for identifying relevant documents on imitation as a form of innovation.

Organizational Dynamics of Innovation, Imitation, and Information Control in Chocolate and Confectionery Firms in Colombia

After conducting a descriptive analysis of the results, it becomes necessary to delve deeper into the interviewees' opinions and perceptions. This section first examines the findings by thematic family, followed by an analysis of each code individually. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives regarding imitation within Colombia's chocolate and confectionery sector.

From the family-level analysis, innovation is identified within this sector as a strategic and systemic process. Firms do not restrict themselves to developing entirely new products; instead, they adopt an integrated perspective in which the adaptation, improvement, and optimization of existing products are also valued. This approach enables organizations to remain agile, respond to market trends, and sustain a competitive position aligned with customer needs. Interviewee 1 summarizes this by stating that “there is an Innovation Management unit that conducts market research, consumer analysis, and works closely with the Market Intelligence area, which continuously evaluates consumer behavior.” Similarly, Interviewee 2 notes that “changes were also made to existing products. It was not only about introducing new items, but about improving key attributes, such as flavor and formulation, based on consumer behavior.”

The analysis also identified imitation as a valid tool for improvement and optimization. Far from being a simple act of replication, imitation is understood as a strategy that enhances, adjusts, and streamlines the innovation process. Interviewee 2 asserted that “the company leverages lessons from the sector, evaluates what has already been done, and builds something better or more efficient on that basis.” Complementing this view, Interviewee 1 remarked that “observing what works in other companies can serve as a foundation, but the key lies in adapting it to one's own reality, not in making a direct copy.” Both perspectives associate imitation with analysis and adaptation rather than mechanical reproduction.

Interviewee 0, as an external validator, offered a similar viewpoint, noting that “sometimes we start with something that already works, but we adjust it so it makes more sense within the product line,” while Interviewee 4 cautioned that “copying without discernment is pointless; one must understand the reasons behind success before replicating it.” These statements reinforce the notion that imitation adds value when combined with critical evaluation and differentiation objectives.

Finally, for this particular sector, information and intellectual property protection emerged as fundamental pillars. Safeguarding formulas, brands, trade secrets, and maintaining confidentiality is essential to preserving competitive advantages. Interviewee 4 explained that “all of us had confidentiality agreements for the projects. It was part of the standard procedure” and added that “confidentiality was always a priority, especially when working with external suppliers or during early development stages.” Similarly, Interviewee 2 highlighted that “technical information does not circulate outside the team. Not even all employees have access to it—only those directly involved.” These statements reveal organizational policies designed to restrict access to sensitive information.

Interviewee 0 emphasized the strategic importance of this control, stating that “protecting formulas and processes is a basic condition. You cannot compete without it.” This was echoed by Interviewee 1, who noted that “if that information is lost, part of the company’s value is lost as well.” Together, these perspectives demonstrate that firms implement legal, structural, and cultural mechanisms to ensure the security of knowledge.

For the chocolate and confectionery sector, the balance between innovation, imitation, and effective protection is vital to organizational success. Properly managing these elements creates value, optimizes resources, and ensures sustainable and ethical practices. This balance strengthens firms’ capacity to adapt to diverse markets, preserves organizational identity, and consolidates long term strategic advantages.

Integration of Innovation, Imitation, and Knowledge Protection

The information obtained from interviews with three firms in the chocolate and confectionery sector reveals that they have developed a strategic management model in which innovation and imitation complement each other under an ethical and efficient framework,

supported by structured information and intellectual property protection measures. This integration enables firms to remain competitive, adapt swiftly to market trends, and build sustainable advantages in demanding environments. To better understand these relationships, it is necessary to analyze each code identified in the data analysis section, grouped by their respective analytical families.

Within the innovation family, interviewees agreed that innovation is not limited to inventing from scratch; rather, it is a strategic, consumer-oriented practice. Customer-centered innovation emerged as a common theme across the interviews. Participants noted that any development process must begin with a deep understanding of the target market's preferences and needs. One interviewee stated that "once this preliminary feasibility is identified, the next step is to deepen our knowledge of the consumer: understanding their needs, dissatisfactions, and desired benefits" (Interviewee 0).

This perspective is neither static nor episodic. It requires constant monitoring of consumer preference shifts, particularly for companies aiming to maintain a fresh and relevant product portfolio. Another interviewee explained that "the important thing is not to remain stagnant, not to repeat the same thing, and never to stop listening to the consumer" (Interviewee 2), underscoring that environmental dynamism demands a proactive and adaptive attitude.

This customer orientation translates into an internal structure where innovation is not the sole responsibility of a single department. Team-based innovation emerged as a key and common practice. Ideas originate not only from marketing or R&D but also from sales, production, logistics, and even external partners. This collaborative approach integrates multiple perspectives, enriching the creative process. As one interviewee observed, "ideas do not only come from marketing or research; they also come from production, sales, and even the international business team" (Interviewee 2). This suggests a transversal innovation system in which diverse experiences contribute to realistic, business-oriented solutions.

Systematic innovation was another shared characteristic. Firms structure their processes into stages, with defined methodologies and evaluation criteria. This approach enables control over new product development from ideation to launch, preventing improvisation that could result in cost overruns or missed opportunities. Structured methodologies do not inhibit creativity;

instead, they channel it toward strategic objectives. As one interviewee explained, “innovation requires an open mind and a constant search for improvements and opportunities, both in what already exists and in what has yet to be created” (Interviewee 2). This logic also applies to product launches, which several interviewees considered decisive. As Interviewee 2 vividly put it, “it’s like cooking: if you take something out too early, it’s raw; if you take it out too late, it burns.”

Added value emerged as one of the most important conceptual pillars in the sector’s discourse. Innovating does not necessarily mean creating from scratch but rather delivering a recognizable improvement for the consumer. This value may manifest in flavor enhancements, packaging improvements, new functionalities, or more efficient commercial experiences. “Innovation is not limited to launching entirely new products. Sometimes, innovation means taking an existing idea and elevating it, transforming it into a product, or applying it differently. What matters is achieving transformation and added value” (Interviewee 2).

This approach does not imply replicating ideas without discernment but transforming them with strategic intent. Another participant explained that “the physical product may resemble that of the competition, but what we seek is to add value through the consumer experience. That is where the difference lies” (Interviewee 1).

Completely new inventions remain part of firms’ strategies, although less frequently than other approaches, due to higher costs, longer development times, and greater uncertainty. Nevertheless, they allow for pioneering proposals with a strong impact on brand positioning. One interviewee remarked that “the development of entirely new and original products is also a constant priority” (Interviewee 1). The external validator confirmed this, noting that “sometimes, we start from scratch, especially when there is a need for something completely new” (Interviewee 0). These statements reflect a selective willingness to invest in high-risk, high-reward innovation processes.

All of these approaches share the objective of building sustainable competitive advantage. The goal is not to innovate for its own sake or under external pressure but to develop internal capabilities that sustain long-term leadership. As one participant explained, “the added value lies in protecting the core of the business, its essence. If you are committing

resources to a development, it becomes vital to ensure that this effort is not compromised” (Interviewee 4).

Parallel to innovation, imitation emerged as a central and structured strategy, even when not explicitly labeled as such. Sector firms acknowledged its value as a mechanism for optimization, agile adaptation, and risk reduction. This imitation is not based on literal copying but on an active process of learning and transformation. Interviewee 2 stated that “innovation also allows for greater agility in market launches by leveraging what already exists and giving it a new perspective.” This illustrates how prior references serve as legitimate starting points for creating distinctive proposals. Similarly, Interviewee 1 explained that “we take these ideas, adapt them, and give them our distinctive touch. We have no problem working with products already developed or existing elsewhere, as long as we can offer consumers a differentiated proposal.”

Contrasting Theory with Business Reality in the Sector

The analysis presented here contrasts theories that frame imitation as a pathway to innovation with the dynamics observed in Colombia’s chocolate and confectionery industry. This industry—marked by the constant need to adapt to a competitive, fluid, and globalized environment—offers an ideal context for examining how imitative practices materialize within innovative processes. To do so, we relate findings from a qualitative analysis based on interviews with key sector actors to the conceptual framework developed from sources such as Schumpeter (1934, 1939), Rojas and Pérez (2017), Nian (2004), and other authors who have examined imitation from different perspectives.

Historically, innovation has been understood in terms of radical, original creation. However, authors such as Schnaars (1994), Rojas and Pérez (2017), and Spithoven et al. (2011) have argued that imitation can be an equally legitimate route to innovation. This approach—often termed imitative innovation—rests on the premise that adapting, improving,

and customizing existing solutions can create value, minimize risk, and respond more effectively to market needs.

The literature distinguishes several types of imitation: exact, creative, and adaptive. Exact imitation involves direct copying of a product or process; creative imitation adds differentiating elements; and adaptive imitation adjusts to cultural, social, or technical context. As Nian (2004) notes, this process includes several stages: identifying relevant innovations, selecting the mode of imitation (imported, defensive, or patent-based), developing the solution, and adapting it to the firm's own context.

The analysis of interviews conducted with firms in the Colombian chocolate and confectionery sector shows that imitation is not only widespread but also constitutes a strategic, deliberate, and structured practice. Firms do not replicate without judgment; instead, they develop internal capabilities to observe, analyze, and adapt practices that have proven successful in other contexts. In this regard, Figure 4 synthesizes the process of strategic imitation identified in the sector, which integrates the observation of external benchmarks, the selection of viable practices, their adaptation to the organizational context, the incorporation of added value, and the protection of knowledge as part of a competitiveness-oriented logic. As Interviewee 2 put it, "It is essential to observe what other companies are doing. If something is working well (or even moderately well), it may represent an opportunity for improvement." This statement reflects an optimization-based imitation in which the goal is not exact copying but a contextualized reinterpretation of observed good practices. The same interviewee adds that "although we always seek to offer something original with the brand's own DNA, it is valid to draw inspiration from what is seen in the market" (Interviewee 2).

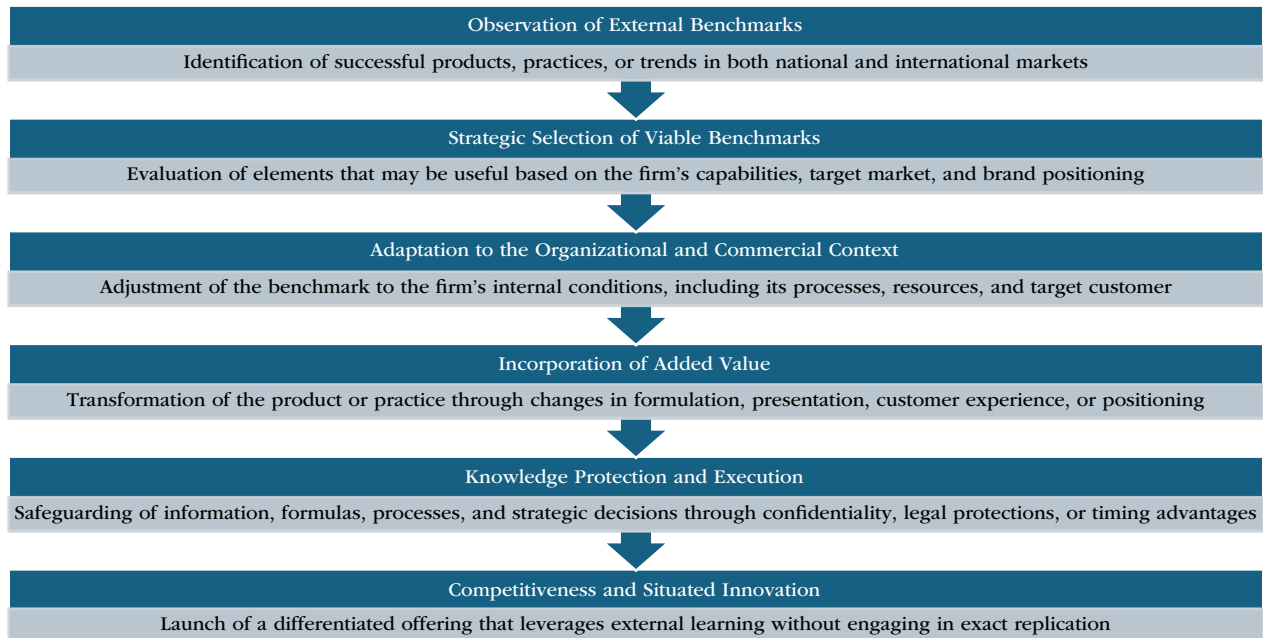


Figure 4. Strategic Imitation Process in the Colombian Confectionery Sector

Note: The process does not follow the logic of mechanical replication but rather a dynamic of observation, analysis, reinterpretation, and differentiation aimed at building competitive advantage.

Source: Own elaboration.

This logic can also be interpreted through the lens of dynamic capabilities, insofar as imitation in the sector does not reduce to the reproduction of external benchmarks but involves identifying opportunities in the environment, assimilating relevant learning, and reconfiguring resources, processes, and value propositions according to organizational and market conditions. In this regard, Teece et al. (1997) and Teece (2010) argue that competitive advantage in changing environments depends on the ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies. Similarly, Londoño-Cardozo et al. (2025) show that these capabilities can be analyzed through components such as opportunity sensing, learning and absorptive capacity, integration, reconfiguration, and innovation. From this perspective, the strategic imitation identified in firms within the Colombian confectionery sector can be understood as a manifestation of dynamic capabilities, as it transforms external knowledge into contextually grounded and competitively relevant organizational responses.

This view aligns with the notion of creative imitation described by Rojas and Pérez (2017), whereby external knowledge is transformed into relevant internal solutions through

adaptation and innovation. In the same vein, the external validator underscores that “it is valuable to learn from others, provided that local conditions and context are taken into account” (Interviewee 0), clarifying that imitation is not replication without analysis but a deliberate process of abstraction and reinterpretation with added value.

Another prominent theme is the reluctance to use the term imitation because of its negative connotations. Instead, firms prefer to speak of strategic adaptation or innovation based on existing products. As Interviewee 4 stated, “Rather than talking about imitation, we prefer to speak of strategic adaptation aimed at achieving a product aligned with the market and with our operational capabilities.” This terminological choice is not trivial; it reveals a sophisticated conception of innovation as a dynamic process of transformation rather than simple reproduction. From a theoretical standpoint, Schnaars (1994) emphasizes that successful imitators do more than copy; they improve and personalize products to generate competitive advantages. This perspective is evident in sector practice. As Interviewee 4 explains, “It was not about replicating a product as such—that is, not about making an identical copy or an exact replica of another. Rather, what we did was adapt.” Another interviewee reinforces the point: “In many cases, we started from a replicated or adapted idea, but that did not jeopardize the innovation process. Innovation was still necessary, because even when replicating or adapting something, we had to rebrand under our own labels and adjust it to our processes and internal capabilities” (Interviewee 1).

Indeed, interview evidence indicates that firms pursue continuous improvement of what is imitated—through adjustments in quality, presentation, functionality, and packaging. This phenomenon is not unique to this sector; the external validator illustrates it succinctly: “It is not necessarily about being the first in the world to do something, but about being the first to dare to apply existing knowledge in a new context” (Interviewee 0). These underscores contextualized innovation as a basis for differentiation.

The process is neither ad hoc nor purely empirical. Several firms apply structured methodologies to analyze benchmarks and execute adaptation. Interviewee 4 notes that “the organization followed an internal methodology developed over more than 20 years, based on collaboration among marketing, innovation, legal, and production, which ensured coherence from project inception through implementation.” This organizational structure

supports experience-based innovation while also systematizing environmental scanning, as proposed by Spithoven et al. (2011).

Theory also highlights one of imitation's key advantages: reducing technical and financial risk (Tidd & Bessant, 2020). Interviewee 3 put it this way: "I believe innovation is not only about creating something entirely new; it is also about improving what already exists, possibly with a more efficient and disruptive approach." In this sense, imitation enables novel solutions without incurring the full costs of failure. The external validator concurs: "Innovation requires a lot of time and money, and time is a critical factor. So, if I can save time and even money—or invest those resources in later stages—I can get closer to achieving meaningful innovation in my context" (Interviewee 0). Here, imitation functions as a catalyst that optimizes time and resources, which is crucial under intense competitive pressure.

That said, the line between ethical and unfair imitation is delicate. Most interviewees insisted that imitation without transformation and discernment is not only ineffective but harmful. As Interviewee 4 warned, "If what you do is replicate a product exactly—copying the product itself, its consumption mode, the target niche, and the distribution channels—then we are talking about 100% replication." The prevailing view is that only transformative imitation aligns with innovation principles.

In practice, imitation is tightly coupled with added value. Interviewee 1 summarized it as follows: "The physical product may resemble that of the competition, but what we seek is to add value through the consumer experience. That is where the difference is made and where, for us, the real added value lies." This is consistent with Nian's (2004) definition, which holds that effective imitation entails adapting, improving, and delivering something distinctive. In Colombia's chocolate and confectionery sector, we thus observe a form of innovation grounded in creative, conscious, and adaptive imitation—external knowledge interpreted and transformed through structured methodologies, internal capabilities, and a strong customer orientation. This approach generates differentiated products, reduces risk, and strengthens competitiveness without resorting to simple copying. As Schumpeter (1934, 1939) argued, innovation does not reside exclusively in *ex nihilo* creation but also in the intelligent recombination of preexisting elements—a principle that clearly guides sector practices.

This strategy also lets Colombian firms respond rapidly to market dynamics—a critical capability in an environment where trends evolve quickly. Active observation of domestic and international competitors becomes a constant source of inspiration and adjustment. Spithoven et al. (2011) and Wang and Wang (2020) emphasize that effective imitation requires the ability to absorb external knowledge. In the chocolate and confectionery sector, there is evident openness to international best practices.

From a theoretical standpoint, a necessary condition for imitation to become value adding innovation is the existence of internal absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). This implies organizational structures, and technical teams are able not only to capture environmental signals but also to reinterpret, transform, and reconfigure external knowledge into proprietary solutions. In Colombia's sector, however, there appears to be uneven alignment between imitative practices and internal research and development (R&D) capacity.

Some firms, primarily larger ones, show a more mature integration of imitation and innovation. As Interviewee 2 explains, “Developing it from scratch with our own research, imagery, flavor, and value proposition. Thus, it is not about copying but about reinventing what exists in a new context.” This reflects a deliberate strategy of reinterpretation in which external knowledge is deconstructed, analyzed, and recomposed according to the firm's capabilities, thereby generating genuine innovation. Still, this reality is not generalizable across the sector; many firms lack formal R&D structures and therefore rely on simpler operational adaptations, limiting their ability to transform knowledge into sustained differentiation.

Another relevant theoretical angle is proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (1999), who argue that organizations facing uncertainty tend to resemble each other through mimetic isomorphism. From this perspective, imitation does not necessarily arise from rational choice but from normative, social, or institutional pressures that push firms to replicate what is already deemed legitimate. In Colombian business discourse, however, this institutional dimension is rarely acknowledged as a driver of imitation.

Indeed, most interviewees justify imitative practices on pragmatic or commercial grounds. Interviewee 3, for example, stated: “We focus heavily on market analysis and on tracking global trends; that is always our starting point.” And Interviewee 1 added: “The

physical product may resemble that of the competition, but what we seek is to add value through the consumer experience.” These accounts do not mention institutional pressures as incentives to imitate, suggesting that although the processes technically reflect an isomorphic pattern, actors neither perceive nor label them as such. This omission highlights a gap between academic analysis and day-to-day business experience.

Finally, a salient divergence between theory and practice concerns knowledge protection. The literature (Cohen et al., 2000) underscores mechanisms such as patents, trade secrets, temporary protection, and complementary capabilities as means to shield innovation from imitators. In the sector studied, however, reliance on formal patents is limited; protection strategies lean more on informal mechanisms. Interviews reveal that firms participate in trade fairs and collaborate with foreign partners to track trends; such strategic scanning translates into selective use of validated technologies, ingredients, and processes later adapted to the Colombian market. Imitation does occur, but within a critical, contextualized logic. As Interviewee 4 explained, “Confidentiality was always contractually stipulated [...] We all had specific non-disclosure agreements for products slated for launch.” The external validator likewise cautioned, “If we do not properly secure confidentiality around our processes, formulas, market information, or insights, that competitive advantage can be easily lost” (Interviewee 0).

These statements indicate that, rather than relying on institutional protection such as patents, which can be costly and require the disclosure of technical information, firms resort to internal non-disclosure agreements, a loyalty-based organizational culture, access controls, and the protection of sensitive data. This informal model is functional in contexts of accelerated competition and limited resources but also entails risks, given its comparatively weaker legal backing against external breaches.

In sum, juxtaposing theory and practice around imitation as a mechanism for innovation reveals significant tensions concerning the meaning attributed to the concept, its acceptance within organizations, and its strategic application. Academia has broadly legitimized imitation as a valid mechanism for generating innovation, particularly in resource constrained environments. Yet firms in Colombia’s confectionery sector—though they frequently use this strategy—tend to avoid the term, to improvise in its execution, and to protect outcomes through informal means. This gap underscores the need to build a bridge between theory

and practice that recognizes imitation not as a threat to creativity but as a useful tool when managed with discernment, planning, and a transformative purpose.

Conclusions

The analysis developed throughout this study reveals multiple layers of reflection that move beyond a merely instrumental assessment of imitation as an innovation strategy. First, a structural contradiction emerges between business discourse that champions innovation as the engine of competitive development and organizational practices that, in reality, privilege forms of creation grounded in previously validated market references. This tension is significant. Although the interviews and documentary review show that many firms in Colombia's chocolate and confectionery sector apply clear principles of creative imitation, the practice is often renamed through euphemisms or displaced by expressions intended to distance it from the stigma associated with "copying." The reluctance to label imitation as such is not merely linguistic but profoundly symbolic: it reflects a social construction of innovation anchored in a logic of absolute originality that sidelines other legitimate ways of creating value.

This point is especially salient in highly competitive environments, where the possibilities for radical innovation are typically limited. Economic and organizational realities in the country make it difficult for most firms to adopt radical innovation as their primary path. In this context, imitation emerges as a rational, adaptive alternative aligned with environmental conditions. Nevertheless, despite its practical utility, imitation remains excluded from the hegemonic discourse on innovation. This disconnect between what organizations do and what is publicly recognized as innovative may be constraining the strategic development of imitation by failing to generate the necessary conditions—clear guidelines, dedicated resources, or supportive policy instruments—for its deliberate, ethical, and sustained application.

From a sectoral standpoint, the findings also indicate that Colombia's chocolate and confectionery industry compete through nuanced differentiation. While many products conform to similar formats—by flavor, presentation, or market segment—firms implement targeted adjustments that allow them to position offerings as novel without significantly

altering existing production or commercial structures. These adjustments are not random; they result from careful analysis of successful practices observed among market leaders. This form of incremental innovation—continuous improvement over familiar products—can be read as a clear example of strategic imitation. What is noteworthy, however, is that companies seldom acknowledge it as such, justifying it instead in terms of customization, continuous improvement, or alignment with consumer preferences. The result is an invisibilization of imitation that hinders its systematic study, theoretical validation, and inclusion within formal business training frameworks.

This dynamic also has implications for SMES within the same sector, as the practices developed by large firms and multinational corporations do not remain isolated but tend to diffuse toward smaller actors. In many cases, SMES end up imitating products, formats, presentations, or commercial strategies of larger competitors, not only because these firms set market trends, but also because their internal capabilities to generate original innovation are often more limited. In this way, the strategies of large companies are not only applicable to the broader sector but also directly shape the competitive orientation of SMES, which rely on adaptive imitation as a mechanism for survival and response within a market dominated by larger-scale corporate benchmarks.

This finding opens a methodological discussion relevant to organizational studies in emerging economies. If organizations imitate but do not declare it; if experts recognize the process but disavow it in their formulations; and if regulatory frameworks privilege an elitist vision of innovation, then traditional analytical instruments are insufficient to capture the complexity of value creation dynamics in these contexts. The methodology employed in this work—semi-structured interviews and hermeneutic analysis—made it possible to access discursive dimensions that would otherwise remain unnoticed. It also revealed limits to accessing strategic information, as well as ethical tensions arising from confidentiality, knowledge protection, and the fear of being imitated by others. This situation underscores the need for more flexible, context-sensitive methodologies capable of interpreting silences, omissions, and linguistic substitutions as part of the findings rather than mere information gaps.

A direct pedagogical implication is the need to incorporate the analysis of imitation as an innovation strategy into curricula in management, business administration, and product

engineering. In particular, innovation courses should embrace approaches that recognize that creation does not always begin from scratch; in many cases, innovating means identifying what already works, reinterpreting it, and adapting it to new needs or audiences. This perspective not only expands the strategic toolkit available to future professionals but also helps dismantle prejudices that constrain recognition of valid forms of innovation. It thus strengthens a more realistic, critical, and contextualized understanding of the innovation process—one that better matches the structural conditions of the Colombian environment.

In the same vein, a cross-cutting recommendation is to normalize the concept of imitation within academic, industry, and public policy arenas. This does not mean legitimizing unfair copying or illegitimate appropriation of others' knowledge; rather, it entails recognizing that there are ethical, legitimate, and strategic ways to imitate. As evidenced in the interviews, creative imitation requires research, market insight, adaptive capacity, and cultural sensitivity. It is neither a shortcut nor an easy fix, but a pathway to innovation with its own characteristics—worthy of study, instruction, and promotion with the same rigor as other forms of creation. To that end, business-promotion bodies—such as chambers of commerce, innovation agencies, and entrepreneurship funds—should design instruments that include this perspective, guiding firms on how to imitate lawfully, appropriately, and with differentiation.

The study also revealed significant difficulties in accessing granular sectoral information. This limitation not only hinders research but also complicates informed decision-making by firms, trade associations, and policymakers. That companies closely guard their sources of innovation, strategic decisions, and internal processes is not problematic in itself; what is problematic is the absence of mechanisms for sharing learning in aggregated, anonymized, or collaborative ways. Creating sectoral exchange spaces, university–industry collaboration networks and applied innovation observatories could help address this gap. Such initiatives would enable the construction of a collective knowledge base that benefits the broader business ecosystem without compromising individual competitive advantage.

Finally, the findings invite extending the analysis to other sectors of the national economy. Conducting similar exercises in industries such as textiles, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, processed foods, or consumer technologies would help identify common patterns, contextual differences, and sector specific imitation strategies. This cross-sector

comparison would not only enrich the theoretical framework on imitative innovation but also offer a broader picture of how Colombian firms create value under conditions of scarcity, volatility, or constraint. It would also provide inputs for designing sector-differentiated policies, recognizing that industries face distinct challenges and possess varying capacities to innovate from scratch.

Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRedit)

Angela Victoria Arenas-Duque: formal analysis, research, writing (first draft, revision, and editing).

Giovanni Enrique Valencia-Zuñiga: formal analysis, research, writing (first draft, revision, and editing).

José Londoño-Cardozo: project management, conceptualization, writing (review and editing).

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