A Segmentation Approach to Country Image.

A study on Perception of Italy across seven Emerging Markets

Mason Michela, Ciani Stefano, De Nisco Alessandro, Napolitano Maria Rosaria, Oduro Stephen

Abstract

Country image has a tremendous effect on the success of products and intentions to visit a place. This paper analyses consumers' perception of the Italian country image across seven emerging countries: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Russia, South Africa, and Turkey. Drawing from the international marketing and tourism literature, four main structural dimensions of the Italian country image were chosen as focus of investigation: *general country image*, *product-country image*, *tourism destination image* and *cultural heritage image*. The empirical approach consists of a Cluster Analysis with a total of 4,550 respondents. The different tourist perceptions of country image and cultural heritage profile three different clusters: *cultural preferences*, *food & history* and *beauty & aesthetic*. The analysis also shows significant differences among clusters in terms of intentions to visit the country and buy products. Thus a one-way ANOVA with *ethnocentric tendencies* items as dependent variables and cluster membership as fixed factor was estimated. The results confirm that the three segments are significantly different from each other, providing evidence of the cluster solution's external validity. In order to specify the profiles of the identified clusters further on, each cluster was cross-tabulated with external variables such as socio-demographic profiles and attitudinal variables.The results suggest interesting implications for destination markets.

Keywords: Country image; Segmentation; Emerging Countries; Cultural Heritage.

Introduction and scopes

During the past few decades, the influence of country image on consumer behaviour has attracted significant and growing attention from researchers and practitioners internationally (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Lee, Lockshin and Greenacre, 2016). Since Ernest Dichter, the noted industrial psychologist at Harvard, stated that "the little phrase "Made in…" can have a tremendous influence on the acceptance and success of products over and above the specific advertising techniques used by themselves" (Dichter, 1962, p. 116), country image research – or country of origin research - has evolved up to the point of being considered "one of the most researched topics at the juncture of international business, marketing, and consumer behaviour" (Lu, Heslop, Thomas and Kwan, 2016, p. 825), with an estimated number of publications far beyond 2000 (Papadopoulos, Elliot and De Nisco, 2013). Results from this body of research show that the image of a country - defined as "the total of all descriptive, inferential, and informational benefits about a particular country", (Martin and Eroglu, 1993, p. 93) exerts a significant influence on consumers' perceptions of foreign brands, products and tourism destinations.

From a practical point of view, in countries like Italy, the foreign perception of the national image plays a crucial role in explaining the competitive advantage of the Italian products and tourism destinations on the global markets. Culture, history, architecture, arts and, in general, to the so-called "*Italian way of life*", provide intangible connotations that contribute to enhance both consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions towards Italian products/brands (Napolitano and De Nisco, 2017) and visit intentions (De Nisco, Papadopoulos and Elliot, 2017). However, despite its acknowledged importance, few studies have provided so far an extensive investigation of international perceptions of the Italian country image abroad. Moreover, although country of origin is considered a well-established and popular research topic, its managerial relevance is still questioned, especially from a strategic marketing perspective (Usunier, 2006, Josiassen and Harzing; 2008, Samiee, 2010). In particular, according to Samiee (2010, p. 444) "the absence of the segmentation concept in CO research is both conspicuous and puzzling".

This paper analyses consumers' perception of the country image of Italy across seven emerging countries, selected on the basis of their actual and perspective attractiveness for the Italian products and tourism destinations: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Russia, South Africa, and Turkey. Drawing from the international marketing and tourism literature, four main structural dimensions of the Italian country image were chosen as focus of investigation: *general country image*, *product-country image*, *tourism destination image* and *cultural heritage image*. The empirical research was based on a survey conducted on a sample of 4,550 respondents (650 for each selected country) intercepted through an online panel. The study's objectives are i) to empirically identify transnational consumer segments based on similar perceptions of the main structural components of the Italian country image; and ii) to specify the profiles of the identified clusters with external variables such as socio-demographic profiles and attitudinal variables.

Literature background and research gaps

Although literature has provided various definitions of country image and different operationalisations of its constitutive components, research in this field has reached a reliable consensus on the multidimensional structure of the country image construct. The concept encompasses different associations perceived in the consumers' minds and organized as a hierarchically structured mental schema (Papadopoulos, 1993).

A review of the definitional domains reveals two different levels of conceptualization

of country image: a) a "macro" or "general" level and b) a "micro" or "product" level. The "macro" level sees country image as a proxy of consumer judgements of a country's general advancement and modernization (Martin and Eroglu, 1993). Based on attitude theory (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), the "macro" or "general" country image (GCI) includes a plethora of components mostly connected to a cognitive sphere – such as the level of economic development, political environment, perception of the population, cultural heritage and degree of technological development –, and to a lesser extent an affective component - which expresses the emotional value associated to a country (Zeugner-Roth and Zabkar, 2015) - and a conative dimension, defined in terms of consumers' intention to interact with the country (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009).

The "micro" level of conceptualisation focuses on beliefs toward country's products, services, and touristic activities (Pappu, Quester and Cooksey, 2007). Country image studies at micro level have been conducted mainly within two different but related research streams: a) *product country image* (PCI), which refers to the "buyers' opinions regarding the relative qualities of goods and services produced in various countries" (Bilkley, 1993, p. 19) and it focuses on consumers' general perception of products made in a given country; and *tourism destination image* (TDI), which deals with the "sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a particular destination" (Chen and Tsai, 2007, p. 1116) and includes functional characteristics, concerning the beliefs related to directly observable or measurable features (e.g. sceneries, attractions, and facilities), and psychological characteristics, concerning the more intangible ones (e.g. friendliness and atmosphere).

Although the different research perspectives deal with separate dimensions of the same study object, the notion that a country's image is able to affect consumption intentions constitutes a fundamental principle of country of origin research. Results in the context of PCI suggest that a successful country image can directly impact consumers' perceptions and buying behaviors across a wide range of nations and product categories (Lu, Heslop, Thomas and Kwan, 2016), including hybrid products (Hamazaoui-Essoussi, Merunka and Bartikowski, 2011). Similarly, in TDI research, destination image was found as a direct antecedent of intention to return and willingness to recommend the destination (De Nisco, Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2017).

Despite the large number of contributions provided over the last 40 years, with the globalization of markets the field has become subject to increasing scepticism and it has been argued that it is suffering of a progressively widening relevance gap which, in turn, negatively impacts its value and contribution in international marketing (Magnusson and Westjohn, 2011). From a theory building perspective, recent studies pointed the lack of an holistic perspective of the country of origin phenomenon and the dearth of research that simultaneously incorporates the different components of a country's image and their reciprocal effect on consumer behaviour (Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016). As recently pointed by Elliot and Papadopoulos (2016, p. 1158), "the interaction between the product- and destination-related images, and between them and the overall image of a place, remains uncertain".

Past researches found out that tourists from emerging markets are driven by similar motives as western travelers but the level of importance attached to each motive is different (Kim & Prideaux, 2005), then further investigation is needed.

From a practitioner perspective, although literature implicitly assumes that consumers' positive disposition towards foreign countries is influenced by specific socio-demographic characteristics (see for example Bartsch, Riefler e Diamantopoulos, 2016) and that the effect of country of origin on consumer behaviour effect is stronger in developing countries (Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp and Ramachander, 2000), the segmented nature of the country of origin phenomenon has largely been ignored. In this regard, Samiee (2010, p. 444) states that "the centrality of segmentation in marketing planning and strategy, coupled by the call of

incorporating the concept in CO research makes this even more surprising".

The study

Data were professionally collected by a major Italian research agency that maintains representative online panels in several countries around the world. The questionnaire was drafted in English and then translated in Chinese, Portuguese and Russian. 4,550 questionnaires were returned from residents in 7 countries (650 for each country), China, Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Russia Turkey.

Respondents were asked to rate their perception of the following components of the Italian country image: *general country image* (14 items – e.g. "rich country", "high quality of life", "politically stable"), *product country image* (11 items – e.g. "high quality", "aesthetically appealing", "easy to find"), *tourism destination image* (13 items – e.g. "excellent organization of tourism services", "funny and exciting", "beautiful landscapes", "high variety of leisure and nightlife") *preferences for Italian products*; (10 items – e.g "clothing", "technological products", "food") p*references for Italian tourism destination* (8 items – e.g "Seaside holiday", "cultural holiday" , "naturalistic holiday") *cultural heritage image* (20 items – e.g. "archaeological sites", "cooking, culinary traditions", "cinema and films"), *ethnocentric tendencies* (8 items – e.g "when I bought Italian products I have been very satisfied" , "I often speak well of Italian products to family and friends") *intention to visit Italy* (2 items – e.g "I know very well Italy as tourist destination", "I often speak well of Italy as a tourism destination") and *intention to buy Italian products* (2 items – e.g "I purchase very often Italian products" , "I know very well Italian products"). In the last section, the respondents were asked to provide information on various socio-demographic variables including gender, age and nationality. Measurement scales were based on a review of the literature concerning the international marketing and tourism areas. Additional scales were included to measure respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, ethnocentric tendencies, preferences for specific Italian products/tourism destination and intention to visit Italy and to buy Italian products.

Segment Identification

To the extent that "accurate and detailed" segmentation results are the purpose of the present paper Sheppard recommends clustering of raw data directly. Sheppard's study explicitly points out that "Cluster analysis on raw item scores, as opposed to factor scores, may produce more accurate or detailed segmentation as it preserves a greater degree of the original data." (Sheppard, 1996 p. 57). With this aim two classical methods of cluster analysis using SPSS 20.0 and based on Hair et al. (1998) were applied. In the first step, the Ward's hieratical procedure was used in order to explore the data and to identify the appropriate number of clusters. Subsequently the non-hierarchic method (k-means clustering) was employed based on number of clusters from the hierarchical analysis to check for consistency of clustering and robustness of results. Because the data are in metric form squared Euclidian distance based on standardized data is used. The agglomeration coefficient and dendrograms generated from Ward's hierarchical method identified three clusters that grouped 6 components: *general country image*; *product country image*; t*ourism destination image*; *preferences for Italian products*; p*references for Italian tourism destination and cultural heritage image.*

A description of the three cluster solution is presented in Tables 1a and Table 1b. As it can be seen the cases were not distributed equally across the three clusters. Each cluster is named according to the kinds of items that loaded heavily on it.

The first cluster, *cultural preferences*, is the smallest one as it includes 14,7% (n 578) of respondents. This group is characterized by the lowest level of importance to all 56 items (see Table 1b). Examples of key dimension include Country and Italian population (M 4,13), attributes Italian products (M 4,25), attributes tourist destinations (M 4,35), attributes of Italian products (M 4,49) and types of holiday (M 4,54). In Table 1b the culture of the country is associated to: Beauty and aesthetics (10,7%), Architecture (8,5%) and Painting and sculpture

(8,0%).

The second cluster, *food & history*, is the largest one with 45,5% of respondents. This group expresses high importance for all items with means higher 8.0 for each dimension. The culture of the country is associated to Beauty and aesthetics (11,7%), Architecture (10,2%) and Painting and sculpture (9,4%) and also to Cooking, culinary traditions (9,4%).

The third cluster, *beauty & aesthetic*, accounts for 39,8% of the sample, displays moderated levels of importance to all items that were considered in the analysis. The means of dimension is higher 6.0. The culture of the country is associated to Beauty and aesthetics (12,0%), Architecture (11,1%) and Painting and sculpture (10,2%).

Table 1a: Cluster description

Dimensions	Cluster 1 (N = 578, 14,7%)		Cluster 2 (N = 1788, 45,5%)		Cluster 3 (N = 1562, 39,8%)	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
General country image	4,13	1,73	8,42	1,40	6,38	1,60
Product country image	4,25	1,71	8,80	1,18	6,86	1,47
Tourism destination image	4,35	1,71	9,03	1,06	7,16	1,45
Preferences for Italian products	4,49	1,73	8,64	1,34	6,79	1,53
Preferences for Italian tourism destination	4,54	1,78	8,81	1,27	6,94	1,55

Table 1b: Cluster description

Cultural heritage		Cluster			Chi-sqaure	Sig.
		1	2	3		
Beauty and aesthetics	Count	248	839	751	4,56	0,102
	% within Cluster	42,9%	46,9%	48,1%		
Literature and Poetry	Count	183	477	445	5,53	0,063
	% within Cluster	31,7%	26,7%	28,5%		
Painting and sculpture	Count	185	671	636	13,88	0,001
	% within Cluster	32,0%	37,5%	40,7%		
Music, traditional singing	Count	157	440	396	1,52	0,469
	% within Cluster	27,2%	24,6%	25,4%		
Architecture	Count	197	731	691	18,11	0,000
	% within Cluster	34,1%	40,9%	44,2%		
Manufacturing and handicrafts	Count	75	301	260	5,19	0,075
	% within Cluster	13,0%	16,8%	16,6%		
Museums and libraries	Count	132	409	369	0,30	0,859
	% within Cluster	22,8%	22,9%	23,6%		
Spirituality, religious traditions	Count	79	284	198	7,22	0,027
	% within Cluster	13,7%	15,9%	12,7%		
Language and expression of the population	Count	73	241	209	0,28	0,868
	% within Cluster	12,6%	13,5%	13,4%		
Contemporary art	Count	72	248	174	5,66	0,059
	% within Cluster	12,5%	13,9%	11,1%		
Archaeological sites	Count	89	282	270	1,82	0,403
	% within Cluster	15,4%	15,8%	17,3%		
Theatre and dance	Count	75	178	135	8,92	0,012
	% within Cluster	13,0%	10,0%	8,6%		
Traditional population and tied to the past	Count	56	189	132	4,32	0,115
	% within Cluster	9,7%	10,6%	8,5%		
Cinema, film	Count	89	214	191	4,96	0,084
	% within Cluster	15,4%	12,0%	12,2%		
Cooking, culinary traditions	Count	144	669	522	30,81	0,000
	% within Cluster	24,9%	37,4%	33,4%		
Creativity and imagination	Count	81	169	139	13,12	0,001
	% within Cluster	14,0%	9,5%	8,9%		
Sociality, bond with others (family, friends, etc.)	Count	88	215	165	8,77	0,012
	% within Cluster	15,2%	12,0%	10,6%		
Sport	Count	138	264	260	25,95	0,000
	% within Cluster	23,9%	14,8%	16,6%		
Events and celebrations	Count	100	202	194	14,37	0,001
	% within Cluster	17,3%	11,3%	12,4%		
Other	Count	51	129	111	1,99	0,369
	% within Cluster	8,8%	7,2%	7,1%		

The variables listed in Table 1a and Table 1b were employed as independent variables while cluster group membership was the dependent variable. Following MDA, two canonical variables were significant in explaining the variance in the respondent's discriminant function scores. The resulting discriminant functions were subjected to a chi-square test to determine significance of the functions. The functions are statistically significant, as measured by the chi-square statistic. The results of the

discriminant analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Multiple discriminant analysis

Clusters	Group centroids	
Cluster I	-4,282	0,387
Cluster II	1,997	0,166
Cluster III	-0,702	-0,333
Eigenvalue	4,713	0,079
Canonical correlation	0,908	0,270
Wilk's Lambda	0,162	0,927
Chi-square	7084,018	295,437
Significance	0,000	0,000
Actual group	# of cases	Predicted group membership		
	N	I	II	III
Cluster I	578	**517** (89,4%)	0	61 (10,6%)
Cluster II	1788	0	**1764** (98,7%)	24 (1,3%)
Cluster III	1562	1 (0,1%)	46 (2,9%)	**1515** (97,0%)

Bold figures indicate number of respondents correctly classified in each cluster. Hit-ratio = 96,6%

The Wilks's lambda test and a univariate F test show the items make a statistically significant contribution to significance of discriminant functions. The canonical correlation for the first and the second functions were high (0.91 and 0.27 respectively) and significant (< 0.001), indicating that the model explained a significant relationship between the functions and the dependent variable (a square of a canonical correlation indicates the percentage of variance explained by the function)

Moreover the classification matrix of respondents indicates a substantial proportion of cases (96,6%) were classified correctly (hit-ratio) in their respective group, demonstrating a very high accuracy rate (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006).

To further establish the cluster solution's external validity, the three cluster solution was compared with the variable that expresses the Product awareness that is the degree of knowledge that the respondents have about Italian products.

Thus a one-way ANOVA with *ethnocentric tendencies* items as dependent variables and cluster membership as fixed factor was estimated. The results confirm that the three segments are significantly different from each other, providing evidence of the cluster solution's external validity (see Table 3).

Table 3: Cluster validity

	Cluster 1 (N = 578, 14,7%)		Cluster 2 (N = 1788, 45,5%)		Cluster 3 (N = 1562, 39,8%)		F-ratio	Sig.
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
I purchase very often italian products	3,87	1,78	7,54	2,28	5,56	2,07	770,79	0,000
I know very well italian products	4,08	1,82	7,90	2,00	5,94	1,91	979,51	0,000
I know very well Italy as tourist destination	4,15	1,73	8,15	2,07	6,31	1,98	976,44	0,000
Typically, in my purchasing decisions I attribute great importance to the country of origin of the product	4,46	1,71	8,51	1,62	6,59	1,75	1399,38	0,000
I think it would be right to provide consumers further detailed information on the country of origin of the products they purchase	4,61	1,73	8,81	1,31	7,00	1,64	1806,07	0,000
Usually on equal price and features I prefer to buy products made in my country rather than foreign ones	4,57	1,87	7,55	2,35	6,27	1,88	470,49	0,000
I think it would be right to import only the products that are not available in my country	4,61	1,86	7,61	2,46	6,29	1,99	439,11	0,000
The purchase of foreign products damages the economy of my country	4,52	1,96	6,94	2,75	5,90	2,17	213,45	0,000

Cluster profiling

In order to specify the profiles of the identified clusters further on, each cluster was cross-tabulated with external variables such as socio-demographic profiles (i.e. age, gender, and nationality) and attitudinal variables (i.e. *intention to visit Italy* and *intention to buy Italian products*). From four items two dimensions were obtained respectively: "I would like to visit/return to Italy for a holiday" and "I often speak well of Italy as a tourism destination" for Italy as a tourism destination and "I often speak well of Italian products to family and friends" and "I would like that Italian products could be more present in my country" for Italian products. The dimensions satisfied the criteria for internal reliability and consistency, Cronbach's alpha value is higher than 0,60 for each other (Hair et al., 2006).

One-way ANOVAs were performed with two dimensions as the dependent variables and cluster membership as the fixed factor. ANOVA results, with LSD post-hoc comparison of means, reveal significant differences between the three clusters (see Table 4a). Cluster I presents lowest values for both dimensions (tourism destination M 4,34 ; Italian products M 4,11). Instead Cluster II presents highest values major than 8,5. Cluster III is positioned in the middle with values major 6,0.

The three clusters were further cross-tabulated with the variables age, gender, and nationality. Significant differences emerged in the demographic composition of the three groups, in particular Cluster I is characterized by 37,2% of people from Turkey

and from Indonesia (15,7%). In other two Cluster the population is equally distributed. In all clusters the class more representative is from 25 and 34 years followed by neighboring classes.

Table 4a: Cluster profiling

	Cluster	N	Mean	Post-hoc results		Cronbach's Alpha
	I	578	4,34	I & II	0,000	0,864
Att_tur	II	1788	8,82	I & III	0,000	
	III	1562	6,99	II & III	0,000	
	I	578	4,11	I & II	0,000	0,797
Att_prod	II	1788	8,52	I & III	0,000	
	III	1562	6,42	II & III	0,000	

Table 4b: Cluster profiling

			Cluster			Chi-square	Sig.
			1	2	3		
Country	Brazil	Count	34	351	176	453,04	0,000
		% within Cluster	5,9%	19,6%	11,3%		
	China	Count	46	221	217		
		% within Cluster	8,0%	12,4%	13,9%		
	India	Count	77	297	214		
		% within Cluster	13,3%	16,6%	13,7%		
	Indonesia	Count	91	263	243		
		% within Cluster	15,7%	14,7%	15,6%		
	Russia	Count	35	300	231		
		% within Cluster	6,1%	16,8%	14,8%		
	South Africa	Count	80	249	275		
		% within Cluster	13,8%	13,9%	17,6%		
	Turchia	Count	215	107	206		
		% within Cluster	37,2%	6,0%	13,2%		
Age	18-24	Count	163	392	314	24,21	0,007
		% within Cluster	28,2%	21,9%	20,1%		
	25-34	Count	215	727	659		
		% within Cluster	37,3%	40,7%	42,2%		
	35-44	Count	132	412	376		
		% within Cluster	22,9%	23,0%	24,1%		
	45-54	Count	48	190	153		
		% within Cluster	8,3%	10,6%	9,8%		
	55+	Count	19	67	60		
		% within Cluster	3,3%	3,7%	3,8%		
Gender	Female	Count	248	879	723	7,54	0,023
		% within Cluster	42,9%	49,2%	46,3%		
	Male	Count	330	909	839		
		% within Cluster	57,1%	50,8%	53,7%		

Conclusion

To be successful in the global marketplace, managers of national companies and tourism agencies need to know how to effectively address consumers to make their brands and tourism destination attractive abroad and how to leverage on a positive country of origin image. In line with past calls of country of origin studies that are of highest relevance to practice (Usunier, 2006, Josiassen and Harzing, 2008) and to the lack of research that that incorporate the concept of segmentation (Samiee, 2010), this paper uses country image as a tool to identify cross-national consumer segments.

Our results from a large survey conducted in 7 emerging countries with regards to the main structural components of the image of Italy indicate that consumers can be successful grouped according to their perception of the Italian general country image, product country image, tourism destination image and cultural heritage image, indicating that these variables are important to use in both international market selection and international advertising strategies. Moreover, for public policy makers a proper understanding of foreign country image helps direct decisions related to place marketing and nation branding.

From a theory building perspective, this is one of the few studies to simultaneously combine different measures of country image. In doing so, it responds to the call of many authors to provide a more comprehensive view of the country of origin phenomenon (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016). The three segments identified in this study reveal an interesting picture of how the general country, product, tourism and cultural heritage components of place image are related and of how they jointly affect consumers' intentions. Moreover, the study also provides additional evidence of country of origin effects from the perspective of consumers from emerging markets, where both the incidence of international travel and the availability of foreign goods continue to grow.

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