

**Eating in an Italian restaurant.
The role of Country Image in driving Spanish
customers attitude and intention to patronize
an ethnic restaurant***

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Abstract

The paper investigates the effect that the country image of an ethnic restaurant plays on consumers attitudes and intention to patronize it. Using a multi-cue approach, the study verifies the effect that the image of Italy as a country, of its cuisine and of the perceived quality of Italian restaurants exerts on consumers intention to patronize them, mediated by attitude and controlling for some demographic variables. Although the richness of the country of origin literature, studies on services are limited in comparison with the ones focused on tangible products.

The survey was administered to a sample of Spanish customers of Italian restaurants located in Spain and applying SEM. Results support all the postulated hypotheses. Scientific and managerial implications are derived.

Keyword: Country image, ethnic restaurants, Italian cuisine, intention to patronize, Spain, structural equation modeling.

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* The paper is the result of a shared and common work of the authors. Nevertheless, it is possible to assign the different parts of it as follows: Elisa Martinelli contributed in particular to the following paragraphs: Introduction, par. 1, 2, 3 and 6, while Francesca De Canio devoted special attention to par. 4 (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4), 5 (5.1, 5.2) and Conclusions.

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Introduction

Globally, people are increasingly concerned in food issues and are more and more searching for new, pervasive and authentic food experiences. Within the arising food trends – quickness, health consciousness, veganism, sustainability, street and finger food, authenticity (Cushman and Wakefield, 2017; KPMG, 2016) – dining out in ethnic restaurants has become a dominant trend worldwide. As immigration fluxes raise and consumers travel more broadly and experience new flavors and foods, the interest for different regional and national cuisines has grown, leading to the proliferation of ethnic restaurants all over the world. This trend has been acknowledged also by the scientific literature: several studies started to investigate this theme in order to understand consumers attitude towards a certain type of ethnic restaurant (Czarniecka-Skubina and Nowak, 2014; George, 2001; Josiam and Monteiro, 2004; Rossiter and Chan, 2004). But the dominant focus has been mainly put on the role of perceived authenticity as an antecedent of consumer attitude and intention to patronize this kind of offer (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Lu *et al.*, 2015; Kim and Jang, 2016; Jang *et al.*, 2012). Notwithstanding their intrinsic nature, in the extant literature on the topic the effect that the image of the country of origin of an ethnic restaurant exerts on customer behaviour is somewhat neglected. Further, although the country of origin (COO) literature is rich and possesses a long tradition, studies on services are limited in comparison with the ones focused on tangible products, particularly when catering services are involved. This paper aims at filling in these knowledge gaps, aiming at contributing to the COO literature, as well as to the consumer behaviour one.

This paper would also offer a managerial contribution. The Italian cuisine is the second most global ethnic cuisine after the Chinese one (13% of market share), showing a higher penetration in the US (15%), UK (15%), Brazil (13%) and India (13%) in terms of the number of transactions. At a worldwide level, the turnover generated by the Italian cuisine is estimated to be equal to 209 billion euros, of which 60 billion in China and 56 billion in the United States (Deloitte, 2017). Due to this importance and considering that Italian restaurants have a long tradition of presence overseas (Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000) and act as ambassadors in promoting the Italian culture abroad, a wider investigation of this theme might be useful for institutions, consultants and businessmen operating both in Italy and abroad. In fact, on one hand, outside the Italian territory, more than 100,000 officially registered companies, including restaurants, pizzerias and pastry shops, declare to be

Italian (Gambero Rosso, 2017). On the other hand, a number of Italian institutions (the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Cultural Institute, etc.) together with the support of the Italian Embassies spread all over the world, are investing in promoting the Italian cuisine in the world by organizing various initiatives and events, to sustain tourism and widespread a positive image towards our country, people and culture. To this regard is important to mention that Unioncamere, based on the experience gained with the “Ospitalità Italiana” brand carried out with the operational support of the Istituto Nazionale Ricerche Turistiche – IS.NA.R.T. –, has promoted the project “Italian hospitality, Italian restaurants in the world”, aimed at assuring quality standards typical of the Italian hospitality in the Italian restaurants operating worldwide. Additionally, Italian institutions started recently to sponsor the “Week of the Italian Cuisine in the World”, event born in 2016 with the aim of promoting, at an international level, the culinary and food and wine traditions as distinctive signs of Italian identity and culture. Moreover, to support the connection between Italy and food, the Italian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Cultural Heritage and Agricultural Policies, as well as Ice (Foreign Trade Institute), in cooperation with Enit (National Tourism Agency), are organizing more than 1,000 food and wine events in almost 100 countries with the aim to increase the value of the export of the Italian food and wine sector to €50 billion by 2020. Among the initial results of these actions, the Italian agri-food exports grew by 3% in 2018 (Coldiretti, 2018); part of this result could be attributable to the spread of the Italian cuisine thanks to the gastronomic offer proposed by Italian cooks abroad.

To reach these goals, the paper investigates the effect that country image plays on consumers attitudes and intention to patronize a restaurant. Specifically, using a multi-cue approach, this study proposes a structural model aimed at identifying the role that the Italian country image, the perception of the Italian cuisine and the perceived quality of Italian restaurants have on the intention to patronize an Italian restaurant abroad (in the specific case of our analysis in Spain), through the mediating role of attitude towards Italian restaurants. Demographics were considered as control variables. The proposed model was verified performing a survey on a sample of Spanish customers of various Italian restaurants located in Spain.

The present work is structured as follows. After having presented a focus on the specific context under investigation, namely ethnic restaurants, highlighting the market trends as well as the perspectives used and the main results obtained by the literature, a review on the role of the country image as studied by the international marketing literature is offered. Then, the research

hypotheses and the investigated model are proposed, followed by the description of the research methodology and of the main results emerged from the survey fulfilled, followed by a findings discussion. A final paragraph stating the major conclusions, study limitations and further research avenues of the research ends the manuscript.

1. Ethnic restaurants: trends and literature review

The global catering market is expanding and reached € 2.210 billion in 2016, with the Asia-Pacific region covering 46% of the total and the Full-Service Restaurant channel accounting for 52% (Deloitte, 2017). Within this positive trend, ethnic restaurants account for a significant proportion of this market and are expected to have a glittering future. The global ethnic foods market is estimated to grow at a CAGR of 5.1% during the forecasted period 2018-2023 (Mordor Intelligence, 2018). According to the National Restaurant Association (2016), in the U.S., 80% of customers eat at least one international cuisine per month.

As regards the intrinsic nature of ethnic restaurants, Su (2011, p. 425) defined them as “*thematic restaurants that offer cuisine that is rather unfamiliar to the local population*” while Ha and Jang (2010, p. 663) evidenced their nature as “*dining establishments that allow guests to enjoy ethnically authentic foods, as well as, distinctive ambiance*”. These definitions lead to consider ethnic restaurants as eating establishments whose offer is merely concerned with the cuisine of one specific country together with an authentic dining setting reporting to artifacts and signs strongly rooted in the stereotypes that local people possess in relation to that specific nation, culture and people. Indeed, food is considered as closely related to culture and is often viewed as a cultural identifier of an ethnic group’s heritage and culture (Kwon, 2015). Because ethnic restaurants are ethnically themed and are requested to recreate an ambience that consumers might easily associate with the culture of the cuisine served (Ebster and Guist, 2005), scholars have steadily highlighted the role of customers unfamiliarity when studying these settings. Research has mainly been focused on customers’ cognitive responses, taking into consideration factors such as perceived authenticity, perceived risk, image of local foods, and perceived value (e.g., Ha and Jang, 2010; Jang and Kim, 2015; Seo *et al.*, 2013; Wang and Mattila, 2015). But the literature put its stronger efforts on studying customers’ perceived authenticity, recognized as the most crucial factor in explaining customers’ evaluations of ethnic restaurants (among other, Ebster and Guist, 2005; Jang

et al., 2012; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Lu *et al.*, 2015; Kim and Jang, 2016), also because restaurant authenticity has been found to play an important role in generating satisfaction for such customers (Bell *et al.*, 1994). In fact, food is considered as one of the most important factors contributing to customers' perceived authenticity of ethnic restaurants (Kim and Jang, 2016; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007; Tsai and Lu, 2012).

2. The role of Country image on consumer behaviour

The Country of Origin (COO) effect is considered as a crucial concept with a long tradition in international marketing studies.

The COO has been found to operate as an extrinsic cue, affecting the consumer decision-making process similarly to price and/or the brand. In so doing, it allows buyers to infer "beliefs" about product attributes because of the stereotypes that individuals possess about a certain country and the products originated in it (Han, 1989; Johansson, 1989; Knight and Calantone, 2000; Oberecker and Diamantopoulos, 2011). Country image plays an especially important role when the quality of a foreign product is unknown (Han, 1990).

Generally speaking, the country image is defined as "*the total of all descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs one has about a particular country*" (Martin and Eroglu, 1993, p. 193) or "*the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places*" (Kotler and Gertner, 2002, p. 251). To be more consistent, country image is a construct defined at the macro and micro level (Amonini *et al.*, 1998; Heslop and Papadopoulos, 1993; Balboni *et al.*, 2011). The macro country image (Heslop and Papadopoulos, 1993) summarizes the beliefs of individuals on the political, economic and socio-cultural characteristics associated with the overall image of a country (Country Image). The micro country image (Roth and Romeo, 1992) describes the Country related product image (CRPI) construct, and it is concerned with the perceptions and beliefs related to a specific product category produced in a certain country (Johansson *et al.*, 1985; Speece and Nguyen, 2005).

Although the literature on the Country of Origin effect (COO) is rich and articulated, up to now it seems to be still far from being exhaustive (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2013). Actually, the COO literature is almost completely devoted to the study of consumer evaluations and intentions to purchase tangible products produced in foreign countries. While the effect of the country image (CI) on consumers' perceptions and behaviours regarding services has been lesser examined (Ahmed *et al.*, 2002; Berentzen *et al.*, 2008), even if some authors consider the effect as similar to what happens in the product

case (Javalgi *et al.*, 2001). But, as services possess some special features compared to tangible products, such as: intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity, and inseparability (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985), the impact of COO may be even more important in a services context as consumers may rely greatly on alternative quality indicators, such as COO, to diminish perceived risk. Moreover, as the effect of COO depends on the product category (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1995) and this has been found enhanced when services are involved (Pecotich *et al.*, 1996), empirical analysis aimed at investigating the way in which COO affects consumer behavior when a service offer is involved are needed. This aspect is particularly true in the case of catering services, whose literature is mainly focused on the analysis of customer satisfaction and perception of the quality of the service offered and on restaurant attributes. As the COO effect may vary among service categories (e.g., Michaelis *et al.*, 2008) and since now the limited number of papers addressing the impact of COO on services are limited mainly to banking, airlines and insurance (Pecotich *et al.*, 1996; Lin and Chen, 2006; Berentzen *et al.*, 2008), a specific focus on the restaurant setting could extend the scientific knowledge on the subject. To this concern, Lin and Chen (2006) surveyed the catering services but without considering to test an integrative model where relationships between constructs were verified. Moreover, they consider only the effect of the cognitive county image. Martinelli and De Canio (2015) explored the topic with reference to a new possible format of a French brasserie interviewing a sample of Italian potential customers. However, their contribution did not explore a “real” restaurant offer but a potential one and did not consider the dual COO dimension and integrative model that we propose in this work. To extend our understanding of the COO effect on ethnic restaurants, we postulated a number of hypotheses and a theoretical model, as described in the following paragraph.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

This study combines attitudinal research in consumer behavior and the COO literature.

Attitude results as one of the most widely studied subjects in predicting consumer behaviors (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Eagly and Chaiken, 2007). However, the literature specifically aimed at investigating attitude in relation to food is fairly limited in comparison with attitudinal research applied to other study subjects (Phillips *et al.*, 2013). Attitude is a summative evaluation of objects (e.g., food) based on the information an individual possesses

about these precise objects. The individual searches for and collects information about certain types of food (in this study: Italian food) through a number of sources and mature his/her food attitude.

As concerns the COO literature, in this study the authors adopt a multi-cue approach because not only the effect of the country image, but also the impact of the perceived quality of the catering service provided on the attitude towards Italian restaurants are investigated. In fact, customers are combining various attributes of a service/product when constructing the restaurant image.

Research indicates that the quality of the service, food and physical environment are the attributes that have significant implications on restaurant image (Jin *et al.*, 2015). In this work the authors decided to use a comprehensive measure of perceived quality of the catering service provided as this measure was found to influence attitude towards the restaurant (Ha and Jang, 2010; Han and Hyun, 2017). Consequently, we may hypothesize the same effect as regard ethnic restaurants. To this aim, it follows that:

H1: The Perceived Quality of Italian Restaurants (PQ) has a significant and positive impact on Attitude towards Italian Restaurants (ATT).

In the present study, the COO is conceptualized in terms of macro-image and micro-image. From the former point of view, the image of the country (CI) is considered in broad terms as the stereotypes and generalized opinions that individuals have with respect to a given country (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). Lee *et al.* (2015) explored this relationship in the context of Korean catering, while adopting a single-cue approach. Philip *et al.* (2013) tested a model in which the cognitive country image is impacting on the affective country image and, indirectly, through it, on the attitude towards consuming Korean food. However, the prevailing literature on country image supports a different conceptualisation in which the cognitive and affective side of the country image might both considered to directly impact consumer attitudes towards the products of a certain country (Laroche *et al.*, 2005; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). So, the authors decided to concentrate on the CCI concept as it is widely accepted and key in the COO literature. Our hypothesis is as follows:

H2: The Cognitive Country Image of the Italian country (CCI) has a significant and positive impact on Attitude towards Italian Restaurants (ATT).

Traditionally, in the COO studies, the product category is considered as a central element in influencing attitude towards the products coming from a specific country (Roth and Romeo, 1992). It is therefore interesting to understand if this effect can also be studied in the context of ethnic cuisine as the latter is often seen as a reflection of national customs and culture (Okumus *et al.*, 2007; Henderson, 2014). Through visiting an ethnic restaurant that serves the genuine cuisine of a given country, consumers can experience the country, its culture and its people. Following the same concept, in our research, we consider the Italian cuisine as a country micro image (Roth and Romeo, 1992) describing the Country related product image (CRPI) construct. This, in order to understand its impact on attitude towards Italian restaurants:

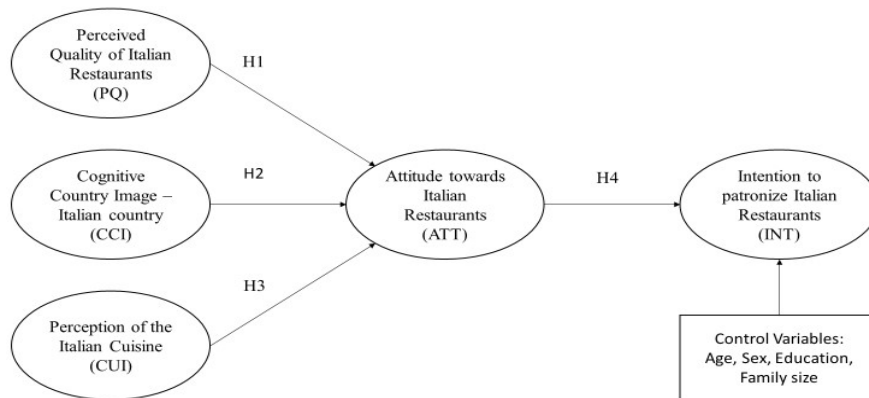
H3: The Perception of the Italian Cuisine (CUI) has a significant and positive impact on Attitude towards Italian Restaurants (ATT).

Since long, extant literature has agreed that attitude towards a product/service positively influences the relative purchase intent (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Attitude in relation to food has long been found to be an important influencer on one's food choice and food consumption behaviors (Arvola *et al.*, 2008; Rozin, 1988; Spence and Townsend, 2006) such as people's intent to purchase food. Thus, attitude toward consuming an ethnic cuisine would be a major factor for measuring one's intention to try it. A positive attitude towards a certain cuisine was found to be a predictor of actual food purchases (Choo *et al.*, 2004). This relationship has been verified in the context of Korean ethnic cuisine (Phillips *et al.*, 2013). In our study context, individuals with a positive attitude towards consuming an ethnic cuisine might be more likely to patronize the ethnic restaurant that offers it, while individuals with a negative ethnic cuisine attitude are less likely to patronize it. We therefore postulate this effect as regards ethnic Italian restaurants, as follows:

H4: Attitude towards Italian Restaurants (ATT) has a significant and positive impact on Intention to patronize Italian Restaurants (INT).

In figure 1 it is summarized the proposed theoretical model.

Figure 1 – Theoretical Model



4. Methodology

4.1. Study design and setting

The aim of this study is to understand the perception of foreign customers on the country image (macro country image) and cuisine (micro country image) and their consequent ability to influence consumer intention to visit again an ethnic restaurant. To empirically test our theoretical hypotheses, we focused on the Italian country image and cuisine. In fact, the latter is considered as one of the main assets of our nation, and it has become the main reason why foreign tourists choose to visit Italy.

4.2. Data Collection

To empirically investigate the influence of the Italian Country Image on consumer intention to patronize an ethnic Italian Restaurant, we conducted a survey among a sample of its foreign customers. The population of the study consists of a convenience sample of customers of some of the most renowned Italian restaurants located in the Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela. Spain was selected as survey country as it resulted within the top five global markets in terms of consumer spending on eating out, based on USD PPP (current prices) in 2016 (Cushman and Wakefield, 2017), together with the

United States, China, India and Japan. The respondents were approached in person by a trained interviewer in the Italian restaurants which agreed to cooperate and fulfilled the questionnaire with no monetary compensation. To this aim, the arrangement phase for data collection was quite complex to conduct and time consuming, even if, at the end of the day, the cooperation rate within Italian restaurant owners was good. Data were gathered in a period of two weeks, twice a day (during lunch and dinner time), in February 2017. The dataset is composed only by Spanish citizens as this was the required indication given to the interviewer.

4.3. Questionnaire details

The questionnaire employed for fulfilling the survey was previously tested with the support of a small sample of Spanish customers used to patronize Italian restaurants. The measurements applied to structure the questionnaire were derived from scales validated by the customer behaviour and Country-of-Origin literature.

The Perceived Quality of Italian restaurants was measured using three items adapted from Ryu *et al.* (2008). Cognitive Country Image was measured using a reduced three items scale taken from Heslop and Papadopoulos (1993). The perception of the Italian Cuisine was measured using three items adapted from the Product Country Image (PCI) construct conceptualised by Roth and Romeo (1992). Two items derived from Phillips *et al.* (2013) were used to measure attitude towards Italian Restaurants, while the Intention to patronize Italian Restaurants (INT) in the future was measured using three items adapted from Wang and Yang (2008). A seven-point Likert scale was employed for evaluating the 14 items surveyed (Table 1). In the final section of the questionnaire, a range of demographic variables were collected and used as control variables.

Table 1 – Constructs and measures Factor Loadings and T-values

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	T-values
Intention to patronize an Italian food Restaurant (INT)	INT1	I intend to patronize an Italian food restaurant next time I'll go out	0.653
	INT2	I would be willing to visit an Italian food restaurant next time I'll go out to dine	0.853
	INT3	I intend to continue visiting Italian food restaurants in the future	0.741
Attitude towards Italian Restaurants (ATT)	Could you please rate your attitude towards Italian food restaurants?		
	ATT1	Very negative/very positive	0.809
	ATT2	Very bad/Very good	0.811
Perceived Quality of Italian Restaurants (PQ)	Could you please rate the overall level of quality of Italian food restaurants?		
	PQ1	Very low-quality/ Very high-quality	0.773
	PQ2	Very bad/Very good	0.860
	PQ3	Inferior/ Outstanding	0.818
Cognitive Country Image – Italian Country (CCI)	CUI1	Italy has a high level of industrialization	0.585
	CUI2	Italy has a high developed economy	0.739
	CUI3	Italy has a good level of education (literacy)	0.678
Perception of the Italian Cuisine (CUI)	Could you please rate the extent to which, in your opinion, the Italian cuisine is characterized by each of the following attributes?		
	CCI1	Reliable	0.724
	CCI2	Excellent presentation of dishes	0.669
	CCI3	Up-market	0.681

4.4. Demographics of respondents

A total of 220 completed and valid questionnaires were collected. The sample composition is quite homogeneous in terms of gender, although with a small preponderance of women (56.8%). 34.1% of the sample is younger than 25 years, while 33.2% is aged between 25 and 35. 21.4% of the sample is aged between 36 and 50, while residual is the presence of the older clusters: 5.9% is aged between 51 and 65, and 5.5% of the sample is older than 65 years.

The educational level of respondents is quite high. In fact, 44.1% of the sample has a high school degree, while 26.5% possesses a Bachelor's Degree while 2.7% a Master Degree. 21.5% of the sample owns a Middle School

Diploma while only residual is the percentage of respondents with a lower educational level (5.5%).

In terms of family household size, respondents are clustered as follows: 4.1% of respondents are single, 26.4% of respondents live in a family composed by two people, 23.6% of respondents declared to live in a three-component family, 32.3% of respondents have a family household size of four members and 13.6% of respondents have a family household size of five or more members.

5. The structural model

5.1. Model identification

Using the software Lisrel 8.80, the two steps approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was performed. First, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was carried out to test the unidimensionality and convergent validity of the constructs. Second, a Structural Equation Model with Maximum Likelihood method (SEM) was performed to compute the structural effects identified in the theoretical section.

Results of the confirmatory factor analysis corroborate that all items are significantly (t-values close to 7) and substantially (factor loading >0.585) loaded onto the expected latent constructs (Table 1). Thus, the convergent validity of the measures was confirmed (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The five investigated constructs show an acceptable internal and external validity being the *Average Variance Extracted* (AVE) values close to the cut-off of 0.5 and the *Composite Reliability* (CR) above the threshold value of 0.7 (Table 2). Since the values of the AVEs for each latent variable are always higher than the value of the square correlation for each pair of factors, it is possible to confirm the discriminating validity of the constructs used (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 2 – Reliability, Convergent and Discriminant Validity Coefficients

Constructs	AVE	CR	INT	ATT	PQ	CUI	CCI
<i>Intention to patronize Italian Restaurants</i>	0.456	0.784	0.675				
<i>Attitude towards Italian Restaurants</i>	0.652	0.790	0.530	0.808			
<i>Perceived Quality of Italian Restaurants</i>	0.668	0.858	0.327	0.642	0.818		
<i>Perception of the Italian Cuisine</i>	0.444	0.704	0.319	0.563	0.565	0.667	
<i>Cognitive Country Image - Italian country</i>	0.480	0.735	0.169	0.363	0.276	0.428	0.693

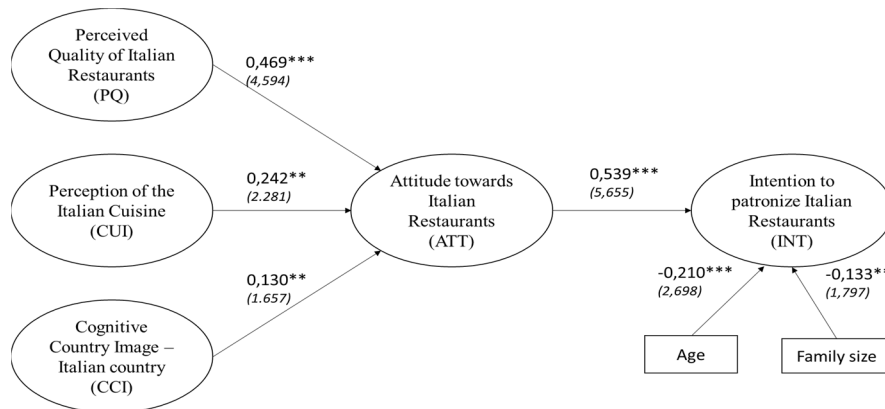
The estimated model shows quite good values for the fit indexes. Indeed, although as it is common in surveys, the robust Satorra and Bentler (1988) Chi-square ($\chi^2_{(110)} = 182.991$) is significant, assuming the not-normal distribution of data. The value for the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.055) and the not significant value for the Test of Close Fit (RMSEA < 0.05) = 0.268 show, on the contrary, the normal distribution of the data used. Moreover, some of the main absolute and incremental indices of fit, such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.965), or the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI = 0.904) are all higher than their threshold value of 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Thus, we can state that the empirical model has a good ability to describe the investigated theoretical model. Finally, as the value for the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR = 0.063) is lower than 0.10 the model presents a limited component of residuals.

5.2. Results

The structural model shows a good predictive ability regarding attitude towards Italian restaurants ($R^2 = 48.5\%$), as well as intention to patronize Italian restaurants in the future ($R^2 = 33.0\%$). Considering the paths between constructs, results show that Spanish people perceive the quality of Italian restaurants as the main aspect that influence their attitude towards this service offer, confirming the first hypothesis ($\beta = 0.469$, $p < 0.00$). Consequently, H1 is verified (Figure 2). This result is in line with extant literature on services in general and catering services in the specific instance, where the primary role of the overall quality level of the proposed service offer on consumer attitude and behavior is consolidated. Very positive is also the role played by the Cognitive Country Image of the Italian country ($\beta = 0.242$, $p = 0.01$) and by the perception of the Italian cuisine ($\beta = 0.130$, $p = 0.05$) in determining Spanish customers' attitude towards Italian food restaurants. Accordingly, we confirm the second (H2) and the third (H3) hypotheses. The renowned reputation of the Italian cuisine in the world and the good cognitive image that Spanish people possess with respect to the Italian country are two fundamental aspects that positively influence the choice of patronizing an Italian restaurant. Finally, in line with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, a positive attitude has a positive effect on consumers intention, confirming the fourth hypothesis ($\beta = 0.533$, $p < 0.00$). In fact, we can state that when Spanish people show a positive attitude towards Italian restaurants, their intention to patronize this ethnic offer increases. Moreover, results evidence a negative and significant relation between two control variables (i.e. age and

family household size) and the intention to patronize an Italian restaurant. In fact, as shown in table 3, the lower the age of customers and the smaller the size of their family household, the higher their intention to patronize an Italian restaurant. On the contrary, gender and the level of education do not exert any significant effect.

Figure 2 – Main effects of the Empirical Structural Model



To evaluate the indirect effects exerted by PQ, CCI and CUI on the Spanish customers' intention to patronize an Italian restaurant the Sobel test was performed. Results of the mediation test evidenced that the perceived quality of Italian restaurants ($\beta = 0.292$, $p < 0.00$), the perception of the Italian cuisine ($\beta = 0.186$, $p < 0.05$) and the cognitive country image of the Italian country ($\beta = 0.086$, $p < 0.10$) positively influence the intention of the Spanish population to patronize an Italian restaurant. Thus, as confirmed by the results of the mediation test, the three investigated constructs do not only directly influence Spanish customers attitude towards Italian restaurants, but they are also indirectly able, through its mediating effect, to exert a positive influence on Spanish people's intention to patronize an Italian restaurant (Table 3).

Table 3 – Direct and Indirect effects of the Structural Equation Model

Main direct effects	Factor Loading	T-value	p-value
PQ → ATT	0.469***	4.594	0.000
CUI → ATT	0.242**	2.281	0.011
CCI → ATT	0.130**	1.657	0.049
ATT → INT	0.539***	5.655	0.000
SEX → INT	0.008	0.100	0.460
AGE → INT	- 0.210***	2.689	0.004
EDU → INT	0.031	0.383	0.351
FAM_SIZE → INT	- 0.133**	1.797	0.036
Main indirect effects	Factor Loading	T-value	p-value
PQ → ATT → INT	0.292***	3.725	0.000
CUI → ATT → INT	0.186**	2.161	0.015
CCI → ATT → INT	0.086*	1.612	0.053

Note: *** p-value < 0.01; ** p-value < 0.05; * p-value < 0.10; INT = Intention to patronize Italian Restaurants; ATT = Attitude towards Italian Restaurants; PQ = Perceived Quality of Italian Restaurants; CUI = Perception of the Italian Cuisine; CCI = Cognitive Country Image - Italian country; EDU = Educational level; FAM_SIZE = Family household size.

6. Discussion and Implications

This study contributes to the literature on the COO effect, highlighting the positive role of country image, as decomposed in its macro and micro determinants, on attitudes and potential choices of users of ethnic catering services, in a multi-cue perspective. From this point of view, our work contributes in filling in the gap present in the literature, giving evidence of the effect exerted by the image of a country and its cuisine on customers attitudes and behaviour when evaluating an ethnic restaurant to patronize. In so doing, this work extends the country of origin (COO) literature in the services context, particularly when catering services are involved. COO exerts a positive effect on service purchase intention and the country image plays a significant role in a service context as well, confirming Berentzen *et al.* (2008) results, and should be taken into consideration in the international marketing of services. Further, this is performed in a multi-cue approach. In fact, results show that when customers evaluate an ethnic restaurant, different factors exert a role in their decision making process. In fact, on one hand, they evaluate the perceived quality of the catering service offered. On the other hand, as the choice concerns an ethnic cuisine, the image of the country and of its cuisine play alike a fundamental role.

From a managerial point of view, results suggest to the managers operating Italian restaurants abroad to focus not only on a quality offer – even if key in creating a positive consumer attitude and intention to patronize their restaurants in the future – but also to strongly emphasise the image of Italy and of the Italian cuisine into their restaurants and when implementing communication strategies. As emerged by our results, the effect of the COO, in its dual dimensions of macro-image linked to the country (CCI) and of micro-image concerned with the product (CUI), is a positive aspect that customers take into consideration in their decisional process. Accordingly, this is an important attribute to be better managed when pursuing internationalization strategies aimed at replicating the catering formats in other countries. The study of Bell *et al.* (1994) evidenced that when an ethnic restaurant adds an Italian theme, consumers increase the selection of pasta and dessert items, and decreased the selection of fish. The Italian theme also increased the perceived Italian ethnicity of British pasta items, fish and veal, and increased the perceived Italian ethnicity of the meal overall. These findings show that changes in perceived ethnicity and food selection can be accomplished without altering food items, but merely by manipulating the environment. Thus, the ambience of the ethnic restaurant is a key strategic tool to manipulate in order to create the ethnic experience.

Another important aspect emerging by our results is that Italian restaurants are very appreciated by young Spanish people. Our findings show that young couple or small families are more willing to patronize Italian restaurants. This aspect has relevant implications for restaurant managers as, above all abroad, the Italian restaurant offer is traditionally associated with “mature palates”. Conversely, our results evidence that the younger Spanish people appreciate the Italian cuisine, thus the Italian cuisine should be proposed as a youthful and trendy cuisine, even if of outstanding value. Therefore, in this way, Italian restaurateurs operating abroad can increase their customers associating the traditional offer with more contemporary and stylish alternatives suitable for a youthful consumers’ target.

The emerging evidences may also be useful for political purposes as Italian restaurants contribute to spread the image of Italy in the world and must be supported (foreign ministry, ITA, national associations such as Fipe, etc.). With this objective, institutions should operate consistently to improve the positive impression that the Italian cuisine boasts all over the world, educating foreign consumers, in particular the youngest and the couples or small families. In this sense, we must say that, to date, there are numerous institutional initiatives aimed at promoting the Italian food and the Italian agri-food

system in the world. However, given the recent results for both the perception of Italian products abroad, and the ability to attract tourists that these products have, we consider strategic for the Italian country to increase these promotional actions. In fact, although the fit between food and Italy is well established in the world, globalization is facilitating the spread of other ethnic cuisines, making this match potentially less stable.

Conclusions

This study enriches the existing body literature on the COO effect highlighting how consumers take into consideration not only aspects related to the service itself, but also aspects related to the country of origin of the service provider when faced with the evaluation of an ethnic restaurant service. Our findings reveal that, although the quality of the overall service offer continues to play a fundamental role on consumers attitudes and intentions, the country image and the perception of its cuisine play a role that is not secondary, directly and indirectly speaking.

Regarding the limits of the work, one first limitation concerns data collection. In fact, we surveyed consumers inside Italian restaurants in Spain, and this may have influenced their perception of both the quality of the service (in the case of a second visit) and the perception of the country of origin. In fact, although respondents are all Spanish, their presence in the Italian restaurant makes them more favourably inclined towards the Italian cuisine. A future data collection in a neutral context, such as a city centre street or a mall may lead to different results.

Moreover, our research is focused on a single foreign country, namely, Spain and a sole city. It would be interesting to replicate the study in other countries and perform multi-group analyses to verify the perception of Italian food restaurants abroad in varied cultural contexts. In fact, in this empirical study, the authors considered two countries that are similar in terms of food habits and culture. Therefore, it would be interesting to replicate this study in more distant food and cultural contexts such as the eastern or middle-eastern countries. It would also be useful to compare the differences in attitudes toward ethnic restaurants between local (Spanish) guests and international tourists visiting Spain.

In addition, in this work we do not consider any possible moderator on the attitude-intention path, such as the level of ethnocentrism or the country-product fit or the degree of knowledge of the country and/or of the ethnic

cuisine (Batra, 2008). These variables might be better appreciated in subsequent studies, together with the inclusion of authenticity in the model.

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