

DOES COUNTRY IMAGE AFFECT CONSUMERS' WILLINGNESS TO PATRONIZE ETHNIC RESTAURANTS?

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the influence of Country Image (CI) on consumers' willingness to patronize (INTP) an ethnic restaurant. The research is conducted in a multi-cue approach, taking also into consideration the impact of the dining core service offer (COFF) on INTP. Specifically, a model in which CI, consumer ethnocentrism (ETN), country familiarity (CF) and COFF affect INTP is proposed and tested. As extant literature is mainly addressed at studying consumers' evaluations and purchase intentions of tangible products sourced from foreign countries, while the Country of Origin (COO) effect on consumers' perceptions and behaviors of services has rarely been examined, this study topic should be expressly interesting for advancing the theoretical and managerial understanding on the COO effect. This is particularly true in the case of dining services, taking into account the widespread market offer of ethnic restaurants and cafés that consumers are increasingly facing today. To test the proposed model a survey was performed. Data was gathered administering a structured questionnaire to a convenience sample composed by three hundreds individuals. Structural equation modeling (SEM) serves to test the hypotheses. The model shows a good fit and the proposed hypotheses are all fully supported. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: *Country Image, Consumer ethnocentrism, country familiarity, dining services, ethnic restaurants and cafés, French bistrot, core service offer, Italian consumers, SEM.*

INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly exposed to an enlarging range of foreign products and brands. This acknowledgement has stimulated a strong and increasing scientific and managerial interest on the impact that the origin of a product in terms of sourcing country, the so-called Country of Origin (COO) effect, exerts on consumers' evaluations and behaviors (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993; Kaynak and

Kara, 2002; Roth and Romeo, 1992; Wang and Chen, 2004; Pappu *et al.*, 2007; Chattalas *et al.*, 2008). As a matter of fact, COO is considered as one of the most researched topics in international marketing and consumer behaviour (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Usunier, 2006).

Despite the richness of the COO literature, extant research is almost fully addressed at studying consumers' evaluations and purchase intentions of tangible products sourced from foreign countries, while the COO effect on consumers' perceptions and behaviors regarding services has rarely been examined. This is particularly true in the case of dining services whose literature is mainly focused on investigating customers' satisfaction and perceptions of service quality (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Weiss *et al.*, 2005) and restaurant attributes (Johns and Pine, 2002; Park, 2004) but is completely lacking, to our knowledge, in considering the COO role. Batra (2008) focused on foreign tourists' motivation and information sources influencing their preference for eating out at ethnic restaurants in Bangkok but do not consider CI in its analysis. Czarniecka-Skubina and Nowak (2014) investigated the popularity of Japanese cuisine in Poland and examined attitudes of Polish consumers towards it but, again, neglecting the CI role and the influence of COO cultural components. However, taking into account the widespread market offer of ethnic restaurants and cafés that consumers are increasingly facing today in their home countries, this literature gap is calling for a specific focus on this topic.

Within this context, the main aim of this paper is to investigate the influence of country image (CI) on consumers' willingness to patronize (INTP) an ethnic restaurant. Specifically, a model in which CI, consumer ethnocentrism (ETN), country familiarity (CF) and the dining core service offer (COFF) affect INTP is proposed and tested. The country image investigated regards France and the dining service evaluated is a French bistrot. To this aim, a quantitative survey was performed, administering a structured questionnaire to a sample (N = 300) of Italian consumers and applying Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

This study contributes to the COO literature in a threefold way. First of all, this research investigates the COO effect in an understudied business sector, namely dining services, in this way contributing in overcoming the knowledge gap of the COO literature in this business context. Secondly, this study employs a multi-cue approach evaluating not only CI but also another fundamental cue on the bases of which consumers decide to patronize a dining service - that is: the core offer service - enabling a better and more complete insight of the phenomenon investigated. Last but not least, the analysis is performed furthering our understanding on cross-cultural management as the model includes ETN and CF.

The paper is organized as follows. After having described the conceptual model and stated the research hypotheses, the methodology used to reach our study goals is depicted. Results are then presented and discussed. Main conclusions together with some issues regarding study limitations and possible future research directions end the manuscript.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

COO is traditionally conceived as a synthesis of stereotypes, skills, experiences and knowledge concerning a certain country and its manufacturing capabilities. Traditionally, it has been defined as "information pertaining to where a product is made" (Zhang, 1996, p. 51). In this sense, COO is an heuristic that can help consumers to make inference about product quality, affecting their beliefs about product attributes and intention to buy. In fact, many empirical studies have measured country image through product rather than country measures (Han, 1989). In the current study COO is conceptualized in terms of country image (CI). This is a broad definition relating to the stereotypes and generalized opinions that individuals possess about a specific country (Roth and Dimantopoulos, 2009). CI is measured employing indicators such as the industrialization level and technological development of a specific country and its political, cultural and economic situation (Pappu *et al.*, 2007). The image of a country as the origin of products is regarded as an extrinsic cue often used by consumers in the process of evaluation of the product quality and impacting on the intention to purchase products. This could happen also when a dining choice would have to be made. So, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Country image positively influences the consumers' willingness to patronize an ethnic restaurant.

The COO cue, as brand and price cues, often acts as a risk-mitigating information about adverse consequences arising from a product purchase (Oberecker and Diamantopoulos, 2011) and it is particularly significant when consumers lack of knowledge/experience about the product. This effect is known as halo or summary effect (Han, 1989). According to the halo view, the uncertainty related to the characteristics of the products leads the customer with low knowledge of a country product category and with low familiarity with it, to use country image to infer an evaluation of its quality before purchase (Han, 1989; Laroche *et al.*, 2005). However, authors (e.g., Johansson, 1989) who support that the COO effect rises as the level of product familiarity increases, believe that individuals, having prior experiences with similar products from the same country and then with high level of product country familiarity, are not only able to evaluate product quality through intrinsic cues, but they are also capable to increase their ability to linking information concerned with extrinsic cues, such as COO, to product quality (Rao and Monroe, 1988). In the situation of high product familiarity, COO acts,

therefore, as a summary factor used as a proxy of the product attributes (Laroche *et al.*, 2005; Josiassen *et al.*, 2008).

H2: Country Familiarity positively influences the consumers' willingness to patronize an ethnic restaurant.

Country image cue can also be affected by some biases related to cultural orientation and national stereotypes of the consumer, such as ethnocentrism (Kaynak and Kara, 2002; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2007; Chrysochoidis *et al.*, 2007; Chattalas *et al.*, 2008). The concept of consumer ethnocentrism explains the phenomenon of consumer preference for domestic products, or prejudice against foreign-made products (Sharma *et al.*, 1995). "From the perspective of ethnocentric consumers, purchasing imported products is wrong because, in their minds, it hurts the domestic economy, causes loss of jobs, and is plainly unpatriotic" (Shimp and Sharma, 1987, p. 280). According to this concept, consumers with high ethnocentric tendency prefer to buy national products because of appropriateness, morality and sense of loyalty to their home country (Shimp and Sharma, 1987; Watson and Wright, 2000; Kaynak and Kara, 2002; Wang and Chen, 2004; Hamin and Elliot, 2006; Bandyopadhyay *et al.*, 2011). On the contrary, consumers showing a low ethnocentric tendency evaluate foreign products on their qualities and on the basis of the utility they offer, rather than of their country of origin; and whenever this is considered, this condition is evaluated in a favorable manner when products are manufactured in a country with a positive image (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). Therefore, ethnocentrism supports the understanding of how consumers compare domestic with foreign-made products and how their judgments may be subject to biases (Kaynak and Kara, 2002; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004). Consequently, ETN can affect the intention to buy foreign products (Sharma *et al.*, 1995; Wang and Chen, 2004). Thus, our third hypothesis is as follows:

H3: Ethnocentrism negatively influences the consumers' willingness to patronize an ethnic restaurant

In this study we adopt a multi-cue approach as we investigate not only the CI cue but also the impact of the dining core service offer (COFF) on INTP. Traditionally, research in hospitality management identified three critical factors that restaurant guests consider when choosing where to dine: the food, the service, and the environment (Berry *et al.*, 2002; Sulek and Hensley, 2004). Weiss *et al.* (2004), investigating the attributes of the restaurant experience, demonstrated that restaurant food and atmosphere are the most important attributes relating to repeating intention. And, as fundamental benefits a customer receives, namely core benefits, are the essence of the dining choice of consumers, we would focus on the dining core service offer and prove its impact on INTP.

H4: The dining core service offer positively influences the consumers' willingness to patronize an ethnic restaurant

METHODOLOGY

The final version of the questionnaire was submitted to a convenience sample of 300 consumers in the city center of the town of Modena (Italy). Data were gathered within a period of two weeks on different days and at different times in order to reach the major variety of restaurant patronize habits.

In terms of socio-demographic features, the sample was composed as follows: 61.3% of the respondents were females, while 38.7% were males. In terms of age distribution, 47.3% were younger than 25 years of age, 35.0% were 26-35 years old and 14.7 were 36-50; just 3.0% of the respondents were older than 51. Family composition is as follows: 10.3% were single; 20.0% lives in pairs, 15.7% live in a family of 5 or more members and the remaining 54% live in a family of 3 or 4 components.

Measures Validity

Relevant reference literature was used to ensure the content validity of the measures. Interviewees were asked to evaluate the items investigated on a 7-point Likert scale anchored at 1 "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree", apart from the level of CF anchored at 1 "very low" and 7 "very high" as well as COFF anchored at 1 "not at all important" and 7 "very important".

	References	Items	Mean	SD
<i>Intention to Patronage</i>			4.254	1.860
INTP1	Adapted from	I would be willing to patronize this French bistrot		
INTP2	Roth and Romeo	I intend to patronize this French bistrot in the future		
INTP3	(1992), Wang and Yang	I would consider to buy food & drink from this French bistrot next time I'll go to a café/restaurant		
INTP4	(2008)	I would be willing to test the offer of this French bistrot		
<i>Country Image</i>			4.978	0.943
CI1		France has a high level of industrialization and technological research		
CI2	Martin and	France is a producer of high-quality products		
CI3	Eroglu (1993),	France has a high standard of living		
CI4	Pappu <i>et al.</i> (2007)	France has an excellent welfare system		
CI5		France has a high developed economy		
CI6		France has a good level of education (literacy)		
<i>Country Familiarity</i>			3.480	1.436
CF1	adapted by	Overall level of knowledge of France		
CF2	Josiassen <i>et al.</i> ,	Number of times visiting France		
CF3	(2008)	Overall level of experience with the French culture/people		
<i>Ethnocentrism</i>			2.630	1.354
ETN1		A good Italian does NOT buy foreign products.		
ETN2		It is NOT right to purchase foreign products because it puts natives out of jobs		
ETN3	Shimp and Sharma (1987), Ouellet (2007)	We (Italians) should purchase products manufactured in Italy instead of letting other countries get rich off us		
ETN4		It should cost me more in the long run, but I prefer to buy Italian Products		
<i>Core Offer</i>			4.773	1.309
COFF1	Adapted by	Menu (Food & drinks) variety		
COFF2	Keyt <i>et al.</i> 1994	Use of local raw materials		

COFF3	Attention/care in preparing/serving food & drinks
COFF4	Courses and drinks originality

Table 1. *Measurement Scales and Items*

To examine the reliability and unidimensionality of each construct composing the proposed model, we use Cronbach's alpha and exploratory factor analysis. The psychometric analysis of the five construct scales show good internal consistency indexes. The Cronbach's alpha index for each scale is much greater than the threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) showing a good level of internal reliability (α INTP=0.958; α CI=0.879; α CF=0.822; α ETN=0.798; α COFF=0.802) (Table 2). All items exhibit a high item-total correlation, indicating their capability to measure the constructs investigated.

	* Cronbach's alpha	INTP	CI	CF	ETN	COFF
Intention to Patronage (INTP)	0.958					
INTP1		0.925*				
INTP2		0.975*				
INTP3		0.959*				
INTP4		0.831*				
Country Image (CI)	0.879					
CI1			0.722*			
CI2			0.732*			
CI3			0.786*			
CI4			0.720*			
CI5			0.815*			
CI6			0.679*			
Country Familiarity (CF)	0.822					
CF1				0.738*		
CF2				0.771*		
CF3				0.836*		
Ethnocentrism (ETN)	0.798					
ETN1					0.604*	
ETN2					0.779*	
ETN3					0.766*	
ETN4					0.679*	
Core Offer (COFF)	0.802					
COFF1						0.622*
COFF2						0.685*
COFF3						0.805*
COFF4						0.725*
AVE		0.854	0.553	0.613	0.505	0.507
Reliability		0.959	0.881	0.826	0.801	0.803

Note: *All factor loadings are significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Table 2. *Factor Analysis: Individual item factor loadings and reliability; AVE and CR*

Structural Equation Model (SEM) with the method of Maximum Likelihood was conducted to assess the validity of the hypotheses. Data was analyzed using Lisrel 8.80. To test the convergent validity we verify that all items were significantly ($p < .01$) and substantially (factor loading > 0.604) loaded onto the expected latent constructs (Table 2).

Moreover, all constructs show good levels of average variance extracted (AVE) - larger than the suggested cutoff of 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) - and composite reliability (CR) - greater than the recommended 0.7 cutoff (Hair *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, to test the discriminant validity of constructs, we verify that the square root of every AVE value belonging to each latent construct was greater than any correlation among any pair of latent constructs (Table 3). We confirm that items correlate higher among them than they correlate with other items from other constructs.

	INTP	CI	CF	ETN	COFF
INTP	1.00				
CI	0.31	1.00			
CF	0.33	0.40	1.00		
ETN	-0.28	-0.14	-0.18	1.00	
COFF	0.14	0.01	0.04	0.11	1.00

Table 3. *Coefficients Correlation Matrix*

Goodness of the Model

Table 4 points out that the overall fit of the conceptual model estimated is good. In fact, with the exception of the chi-square test, that is not significant probably because affected by the sample size, all the other alternative measures of fit show the good model fit: GFI=0.910; NNFI=0.967; CFI=0.972; IFI=0.972; RFI=0.928. Furthermore, RMSEA=0.0498 and the significance of its Close-Fit ($RMSEA < 0.05$) = 0.505 indicate an excellent model fitting (MacCallum *et al.*, 1996). The model has no substantial problems with residuals as shown by SRMR=0.0449 (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

CRITICAL N	300
CHI-SQUARE	$\chi^2 (179) = 311.548, p < .000$
χ^2 / DF	1.74
RMSEA	0.0498
CLOSE FIT	0.505
RMSEA < 0.05	
NNFI	0.967
CFI	0.972
IFI	0.972
RFI	0.928
SRMR	0.0449
GFI	0.910

Table 4. *Goodness of the Model Fit Indexes*

RESULTS

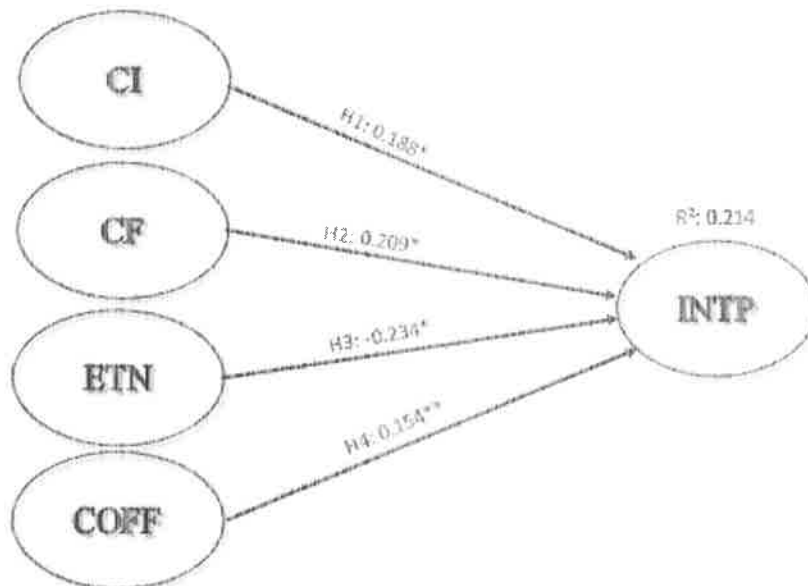
Results indicate that CI, CF, ETN and COFF explain approximately 21% of consumers' intention to patronize the French bistrot. The role of CI in the INTP formation is positive and significant. Thus, we can confirm that individuals perceptions on the political and cultural system of a certain country (Laroche *et al.*, 2005) as well as their evaluations on its technological development (Knight and Calantone, 2000; Pappu *et al.*, 2007) have a positive effect on INTP. More positive the image that

consumers possess regarding a specific country, the greater their intention to patronize a restaurant offering the cuisine of that country, confirming our H1 ($\beta=0.188$, $p<.01$).

Consumers' knowledge and familiarity with the country of origin of the ethnic restaurant positively impacts on INTP. In particular, we found that the greater the overall knowledge of France and its culture, as well as the number of visits to France, the greater the consumers' intention to patronize a French bistrot, confirming our H2 ($\beta=0.209$, $p<.01$).

As expected, consumers with high ethnocentrism tend to prefer to dine in local restaurants/cafés because of appropriateness, morality and sense of loyalty to their home country's products (Shimp and Sharma, 1987; Watson and Wright, 2000; Kaynak and Kara, 2002; Wang and Chen, 2004). Thus, results confirm the negative impact of ethnocentrism on the intention to patronize the French bistrot, confirming our H3 ($\beta=-0.234$, $p<.01$).

Finally, we found that there is a positive relation between consumers' evaluation of the core offer and their intention to patronize the French bistrot. In fact, the higher their evaluation on the menu variety, the use of local raw materials, the care in preparing and serving foods and drinks, rendering them original and attractive, the greater the intention to patronize the restaurant/caf  , confirming our H4 ($\beta=0.154$, $p<.02$).



Note: *All relations are significant at the $p<.01$ level.

** All relations are significant at the $p<.02$ level.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model*

DISCUSSION

This paper is one of the first attempts to investigate the impact of COO on consumer intentions towards a service offer rather than products. This is done taking into consideration a specific business sector particularly interesting for the international marketing and the consumer behavior literature, namely the dining service business, as ethnic restaurants are widespread all over the world and tend to be ambassadors of the specific cuisine and culture of a certain country.

Findings evidence that COO can affect consumers' intentions even in an understudied context such as the dining service business and that this is consistent with the summary effect known in country-of-origin research (Josiassen *et al.*, 2008). In this way, the present research contributes to the extant COO literature overcoming the knowledge gap on this business context. Major COO statements and findings regarding physical products could then be extended also to the service context, with particular regard to the restaurants/cafés business. When studying the latter economic activities, scholars should also include CI and cross-cultural measurements as they result in specific attributes on the basis of which consumers tend to choose the restaurant in which to dine.

The general evaluation of the ability of the foreign country to perform the core offer has a positive impact on consumers' intention to patronize the ethnic restaurant. In our study, findings show that consumers' evaluation of the core offer of the service in terms of variety, use of raw materials and caring in preparing and serving food increase the intention to patronize the ethnic restaurant. Indeed, the greater the consumer evaluates the "country image" able to perform the service, the greater is his/her intention to patronize the ethnic restaurant.

Moreover, our findings give support to the negative role of ethnocentrism, confirming Wang and Chen (2004) and Hamin and Elliot (2006) results even when a service offer and not products are going to be evaluated by consumers.

Results would also have some managerial implications. Managers of this sector should emphasize the information on the country of origin of their businesses, as the effect exerted by a positive CI is stronger than that of the core offer. Indeed, this is a critical attribute to manage, potentially very useful in pursuing internationalization strategies aimed at replicating the dining formats in other countries. But at the same time they should also increase the level of knowledge on the restaurant country of origin as CF shows the highest positive impact on INTP, involving customers in thematic and cultural events to spread the French values and distinctive national traits. From this point of view, the role of public institutions could also be useful to increase the level of knowledge of a specific ethnic cuisine. National governments could support advertising and promotional campaigns in foreign countries referring to their cuisine as a CI sign and in so doing activating a virtue circle on the country image.

Ethnic restaurant managers should also be aware of the importance to segment the possible clientele on the basis of their ethnocentric tendencies, in order to address their marketing efforts to open-minded people, prone to meet other culture habits without feeling guilty if they would not patronize only the autochthonous offer.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite the possible theoretical and managerial interest coming from our study, some limitations could affect our contribution.

First of all, we focused on a cognitive definition of CI, while recent literature suggests to include the affective dimension of the COO construct too (Laroche *et al.*, 2005) intended as consumers' emotions to another country. Even if a cognitive conceptualization of the country of origin construct is predominant and widely accepted in the literature, including affective measures would result in a better and more complete understanding of the impact of CI on consumers' intentions (Maher and Carter, 2011). Accordingly, next studies should embrace both dimensions, cognitive and affective.

Secondly, this research was focused on a single ethnic dining offer, relative to a country image concerned with a developed country (France) as perceived by consumers of another developed country (Italy). Future researches should test the proposed model with regard to other ethnic offers, especially the ones coming from developing countries in order to compare both and check for potential differences. At the same time it could be interesting to repeat this analysis in other developed and developing countries in order to collect the country images and core offer perceptions of consumers of different nationality, as well as measuring for their level of individualism vs collectivism as this has been found to affect consumer intentions in COO literature (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000).

Furthermore, as product evaluations are affected not only by the image of the country they come from, but also by the perceived logical and consistent capacity of that country to manufacture/offer that specific product (Hamzaoui and Merunka, 2006), another construct that could be useful to include in further investigations could be the FIT construct.

Again, the literature on the dining experience evidenced different perceptions as this activity is performed alone or with relatives or friends (Johns and Pine, 2002). Thus, our model could be improved taking into consideration also the social dimension of eating out.

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