Beauty and the Bear.
A representation of Italy's destination image among Russian pleasure travelers.

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Within destination marketing activities, in recent years substantial efforts have been directed towards accurately assessing the ideas, or perceptions, travelers hold about a tourist destination, in terms of destination image measurement. This, in particular when dealing with long-haul tourist markets, where geographical and cultural distance makes harder for DMO marketers to convey the specific identity of a place, highlighting those aspects that distinguish the destination from its competitors. The goal of this study is to identify and qualify the main features that define Italy's destination image in the Russian outbound leisure travel market. To this end, new insights on the Echtner and Ritchie model are suggested, by introducing a fourth continuum (Encouraging vs. Discouraging) where more emphasis is paid on the role of distance and travel constraints in experiencing the tourist product. Findings highlight that overall Russian outbound tourists' perceptions of Italy are of relax, warmness, happiness, enjoyment and fun, especially connected to food, culture and fashion.

Keywords: destination image, destination image measurement, distance, travel constraints, Russia, Italy

Introduction

In recent years, the model adopted by the Russian Federation for economic development came to crisis, worsened by the Ukraine affair and the following US-European embargo, as well as by a considerable world wide raw materials and natural resources decline demand, which was unbalanced by any domestic production capacity. As a result, national GDP recorded a sharp decline, whose collapse is foreseen in a range between 3.5% to 5.5% for the entire 2015, while the ruble was strongly depreciated against the euro and the dollar. Such devaluation, in turn, has significantly reduced the middle class spending power, then giving a boost to the inflationary spiral.

Therefore, there is no wonder, if the travel abroad reservations collapsed, with package tours resulting halved compared to previous season, and if the average duration of overseas summer holiday decreased to one week or two, instead of the previous three weeks (Combined Report Embassies/Consulates/ENIT-Italian Government Tourist Board, 2015). From an internal perspective, this lead to a sharp increase (between 30% and 40%) in domestic tourism, also supported by government initiatives designed to restrain domestic citizens, and to a deep, accelerated reorganization of the Russian tourist market, that is moving towards a model characterized by a smaller number of operators from greater financial strength and greater competitiveness on the international market (RosStat – Federal State Statistics Service; ILO – International Labour Organization, 2015). From an external perspective, this had relevant repercussions in terms of destination positioning for such Mediterranean countries as Egypt, Turkey, Spain, Cyprus and Greece, that decided to intercept medium and low cost travelers, by offering all-inclusive packages at competitive prices.
However, although outgoing travels towards Europe dramatically decreased (-25%) in the first half of 2014, for the same time Italy registered an increase of 3%, making touristic flows from the Russian Federation even more than doubled if compared with those from Brazil and approximately four times more than those from China and India, among the BRIC countries (Combined Report Embassies/Consulates/ENIT-Italian Government Tourist Board, 2015).
In detail, increases are registered in terms of arrivals (1.8 million in 2013, equal to +3.7% compared to the previous year and to + 67% compared to 2010), presences (7.8 million in 2013, with a decrease of 1.2% compared to the previous year, and to +82% compared to 2010) and tourism expenditures (1.3 billion euro in 2013, equal to an increase of 11.4% compared to the previous year, and a +60% in the four previous years), so much that Russian tourists are "top spenders" in all the major Italian cities (the proportion of purchases made by Russian citizens in 2014 amounted to 29% in Milan and Rome, to 17% in Florence and to 16% in Venice), with an average daily budget of approximately 210 Euros, which is more than doubled the amount spend by other outbound tourists (Bank of Italy, 2015).
Although visits are still concentrated in the most famous places, such as Rome, Venice, Florence and Milan, a growing interest is registered in alternative and niche circuits like those of Trentino Alto Adige and Valle d'Aosta, in particular for what is about skiing and wellness (ISTAT - Italian National Statistical Institute, 2015). Moreover, Russian GDP is expected to grow again in the course of 2017, while Russian tourism potential is estimated by UNWTO as 47 million international travelers by 2020.
As a consequence, the availability of accurate and reliable marketing researches, in which the perceptions, or images, potential travelers hold about Italy are described, represents a crucial competitiveness factor (Buhalis, 2000). This, because they may allow to develop marketing programs specifically conceived for the Russian tourism market, by highlighting the attractiveness and quality of the tourist offer (Yeoman, Brass, & McMahon-Beattie, 2007).
However, as far as Italy is concerned, to the authors' knowledge the lack of information is evident: from when the construct of *destination image* was theorized (Hunt, 1971; Mayo, 1973), in actual fact, only the works of Baloglu & McCleary (1999b), Baloglu & Mangaloglu (2001), and Okumus & Yasin (2008) have attempted to measure the image that tourists have of Italy as a tourism destination. These are, however, researches that analyze Italy in terms of a wider, Mediterranean destination, only partially identifying country-specific strategies for strengthening tourism flows towards the country.
Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to measure Russian leisure tourists' image of Italy as a travel destination. In detail the study is designed to (a) to identify major features and components (in terms of stereotypical, holistic, functional and psychological attributes) which define Italy's image in the Russian outbound travel market, and (b) to qualify the elements

that encourage or discourage a trip to Italy, by analyzing the traits which characterize the travel experience either positively or negatively.

By the same token , within the managerial literature on tourism destination image measurement (Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Ryan & Cave, 2005), the intention is to expand the theoretical framework developed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993), which was chosen as the conceptual tool for conducting the study, by paying a greater consideration of the role of distance in experiencing the tourist product (Massara & Severino, 2013; Tung & Ritchie, 2011), as well as the role of the elements that undermine the image of a destination, in the eyes of leisure travelers.

Conceptual framework and research model

Defined by Lawson & Baud-Bovy (1997, p. 2) as «the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place», tourist destination image has been widely recognized as one of the concepts that has probably contributed most to understand the multiple elements that affect travelers' perceptions of their experience (Pike, 2002), stressing the complexity and multidimensionality of the destination product. In fact, it is generally agreed destination image plays a key role both in the tourist's decision-making process (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011) and in the achievement of the destination's competitive advantage (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). This, because it allows to identify a place through positive, strong, distinctive and unique mental representations (Li, Petrick & Zhou, 2008), while fostering cooperation and commitment (Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees & Miller, 2013) among destination stakeholders along with the value chain (Shaari, Salleh & Hussin, 2012).

However, for what is about destination image measurement in managerial literature a lack of homogeneity, reliability and validity of the scales is observed, except for Baloglu & McCleary (1999), Beerli & Martín (2004), and Echtner & Ritchie (1991, 1993).

The latter, in particular, suggested a conceptual framework of tourism destination image assessment and measurement that incorporates three mutually overlapping continuums: (1) Attribute–holistic; (2) Functional–psychological; and (3) Common–unique. The first continuum consists of the two main components of destination image, ranging from perceptions of individual destination attributes to a more holistic impression; the second continuum explains how each of these components contains functional and psychological characteristics: functional attributes can be directly observed and measured, as they are substantially tangible, while the psychological ones cannot be directly measured, as they are more abstract. Finally, attributes of destination image can also range from those based on common traits, according to which various destinations can be evaluated and compared to unique features, which are exclusive to the specific destination. Both common and unique attributes can consist of functional and psychological traits.

By virtue of its high reliability, ease of application and ability to combine the advantages linked to the adoption of quantitative measures with those of qualitative analyses, this model has been widely adopted in literature (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008; Jenkins, 1999). The Echtner and Ritchie model, moreover, makes it possible to reach a uniform representation of the different tangible and intangible components that contribute as a whole to defining the image of a destination. This, also by integrating apparently unrelated aspects to the tourist sector such as, for example, the degree of urbanization or political stability, thanks to the recognition that there are plenty of areas of overlap among the constructs of destination image and country image (Richter & Waugh, 1986; Mossberg & Kleppe, 2005).

Nevertheless, given the culture-specific nature of the destination image, the model may lead to an interpretation of partial or modified data, especially if dealing with cognitive frames differing from those of the segment whose image is about to be analyzed.
With this regard, the effects distance has on how destination image is perceived, should be taken into account. The concept of *distance* itself, however, has not be simplistically construed as a mere measurement of the kilometers or miles that separate a tourist destination from the potential visitor; a correct interpretation of the concept requires it to be placed in relation with both that of *cultural proximity*, that is, with the historical and linguistic contiguity existing between the visitor's country and the one he intends to visit (Kastenholz, 2010), and that of *familiarity* (Baloglu, 2001), seen both from an experiential point of view (the tourist has already visited that specific destination) and a cognitive point of view (the tourist knows certain things about the destination to the extent that he can pinpoint it on a map, for example).
Studies should also be considered on the link between destination image and *self congruity* (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Kastenholz, 2004): in this sense, the key to understanding the interdependence between distance, cultural proximity, familiarity and destination image has to be sought in the opposition *identity vs. alterity*.
In fact, the cultural distance, on the one hand, explains the desire to try something different to the daily routine – that which Urry (1990) defines as "extra-ordinary" – as well as the fact that, when constructing their own image of the destination, tourists tend to highlight the exotic traits of the destination itself (Prideaux, Agrusa, Donlon, & Curran, 2004), as a way to consolidate their own sense of belonging to their own country (Galani-Moutafi, 2000). On the other, it can be understood why identity, that is to say the match between destination image and individual self-image, is considered the most effective predictor of the actual intention to travel, even when compared to the perceived quality of the destination offer (Huang, Chen, & Lin, 2013), as well as a lever that can increase its attractiveness (Milman & Pizam, 1995).
Then, realizing by destination image measurement that a tourist destination is perceived as "expensive" is undoubtedly a useful piece of information; however, this information is incomplete because the way in which the Echtner and Ritchie model is designed does not allow you to understand if the "price" factor implies the destination is "exclusive", thus enhancing its image of the aspirational component, or if it is "costly" indicating an imbalance in the destination offer perceived by the potential visitor when weighing up costs and benefits, that is to say a travel constraint.
However, the interaction or role travel constraints - defined as «various factors which preclude or reduce an individual's frequency, rate, or enjoyment as a participant in [tourism/leisure] activities» (Lee, Agarwal, & Kim, 2012, p. 570) - may have in the definition of the destination image is a common thread running through recent studies (Chen, Chen, & Okumus, 2013a; Chen, Hua, & Wang, 2013b), after their effect had been studied in literature in relation to the decision-making process (Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Hung & Petrick, 2012), the information sources (Weinberger, Allen, & Dillon, 1981; Carneiro & Crompton, 2010) and to a number of variables such as age (Hultsman, 1993), gender (Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988) or physical disability (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2010).
In this respect, Chen *et al.* (2013a) see a direct correlation between the two constructs of travel constraints and destination image, showing that the higher the perception of travel constraints by potential visitors, the less positive the destination image; on the other hand, from a further study (Chen *et al.*, 2013b), the image itself was identified as one of the most effective factors in combating (and, in some cases, neutralizing) the negative impact that travel constraints can have on the actual intention of visiting the destination, playing a role in the complex definition of the image of a tourist destination, on a par with attributes and benefits. Moreover, travel constraints are emerged to have different effects depending on the

cultural context in question (Chick & Dong, 2005; Shinew, Floyd, & Parry, 2004), so much that something that is considered a potential obstacle by members of a social or national group, may not be for members of a group with a different background.
Then, as both the decision to participate in tourist activities (Um & Crompton, 1999) and the definition of an overall opinion on the enjoyableness of an experience (Nadirova & Jackson, 2000) do not depend entirely on the absence of constraints, but rather on the «navigation of those obstacles» (Chen, Ji, & Funk, 2014, p. 199), great emphasis is placed in managerial literature on the negotiation aspect that regulates the perception of constraints (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993; Nyaupane & Andereck, 2008).
As a result of these considerations, a fourth continuum is here proposed to be considered into the Echtner and Ritchie model for destination image measurement. This continuum, which is characterized by the opposition of the Encouraging vs. Discouraging factors, means that, not only can the most significant destination attributes be identified for a particular target, but they can also be qualified in "positive" or "negative" terms, in light of the cognitions and perceptions the respondents have about travel constraints. (Fig. 1).

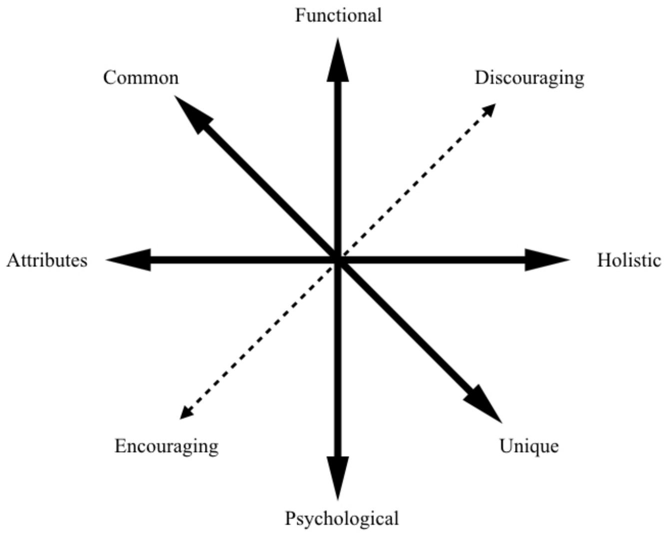

Fig. 1. The Ecthner and Richie model revised.

As a matter of fact, above and beyond the aforementioned negotiation aspect and the different characterization depending on the context in which they are evaluated, there are plenty of areas of contiguity between the destination image and travel constraints which warrant a more synergistic approach (Jackson & Scott, 1999): reference is made, first and foremost, to their dynamic, multi-dimensional nature (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Daniels, Rodgers, & Wiggins, 2005), as well as their ability to limit or, on the contrary, act as a catalyst for the competitive potential of a tourist destination (Chen, Hua, & Wang, 2013). If, therefore, the highest or lowest incidence of travel constraints on destination image is dependent on the extent to which the potential visitor/tourist will be able to perceive them, then it appears clear that, in order to minimize their effect, the stakeholders and managers of a DMO have to be aware of the key elements that are equated with the destination in the eyes of the potential visitor/tourist, and thus perceived as obstacles in participating in tourist activities or as factors which can change the overall opinion of the enjoyableness of the experience. Only in this way, the DMO will be able to promptly and jointly provide the potential visitor/tourist with interpretive and/or perceptive keys to control and thus, neutralize the elements perceived to be obstacles to enjoying the holiday in full, then putting specific destination marketing actions in place that make it easier to access information or become more familiar with the destination, while working - on a management plan - to eliminate them, if possible.

Method

The goal of this study is to first identify and then qualify the main features defining Italy's destination image in the Russian outbound leisure travel market for along the lines of *Attributes vs. Holistic, Functional vs. Psychological, Common vs. Unique and Encouraging vs. Discouraging.* To this end, after an analysis of adjectives related to describing a place or landscape as emerged from Olsen, Alexander, & Roberts (1986), Aaker (1997), and Zube & Pitt (1981), a questionnaire was implemented based on the one by Echtner & Ritchie (1991).

The common and attribute-based components were captured by a series of 5-point Likert scale items (where *1: most unlikely* and *5: most likely*). The original questionnaire by Echtner and Ritchie was used, but attributes were added on the basis of Mynttinen, Logrén, Särkkä-Tirkkonen, & Rautiainen (2015) and Lertputtarak, Lobo, & Yingyong (2014), as well as from an exploratory study the authors conducted, through in-depth interviews to 10 Italian citizens who have lived in Russia for more than two years and 10 in-depth interviews to Russian citizens living in Italy for more than two years, to gain insights into aspects of Italy's destination image and Russian culture. The holistic and unique dimensions were captured by the three open-ended questions suggested by Echtner & Ritchie (1993), whose answers provided image components which were useful for differentiating Italy from a competitive set of destinations. In particular, when measuring the image at a macro or national level (Kotler, Bowen, Makens, Xie, & Liang, 2006), answers on what unique sites and attractions Russian leisure travelers associate with Italy may be used to reflect tourists' collective awareness of its travel products, and may be conceptualized as a part of tourists' brand knowledge. In fact, destination awareness has been found to be a critical prerequisite of destination image (Milman & Pizam, 1995), and a part of customers' brand knowledge, without which their image will not exist in the first place (Keller, 1993). Moreover, this knowledge may be critical for destination positioning and competitive strategies in order to provide useful guidance on alliance building and travel itinerary design (i.e., which destinations and attractions should be included in a tour package).

With the aim of taking Echtner and Ritchie's approach a step further with respect to the image measurement, three more open-ended questions were added to the questionnaire in order to describe the perception and experience of Italy's tourism image, both positive and negative, as well as to find out what aspects discourage, and what ones encourage, a trip to Italy.

In light of the fact that in an open-ended question the level of detail of the data is strictly dependent on the linguistic and verbal abilities of the respondents, in addition to their willingness to provide complete and articulate answers (McDougall & Fry, 1974), the questionnaire was administered in a bilingual version (English and Russian). In order to facilitate the statistical data processing, answers were finally all back-translated into English by two different bilingual Russian students, who worked independently of each other.

The questionnaire was admistered in Moscow, which is the main origin market followed by Saint Petersburg and the region of Ekaterinburgo (Combined Report Embassies/Consulates/ENIT-Italian Government Tourist Board, 2015) to 350 to long-haul Russian outbound tourists, operationally defined as adult citizens who have taken a leisure trip of four or more nights, by plane, outside Asia in the past three years or plan to take one in the next two years (Li, Harrill, Uysal, Burnett, & Zhan, 2010), between May and June 2014. Content analysis instruments were used to analyze the data received from the open-ended questions. The choice was motivated by the fact content analysis is one of the most widely

used methodologies in the area of study on destination image measurement (Andsager & Drzewiecka, 2002; Garcìa, Gómez, & Molina, 2012). This, due to the versatility of the area of application (words, images, videos, multimedia applications, etc. which are analyzed in their specific use), as well as the possibility to obtain a wide and detailed representation of needs, perceptions, expectations and social-cognitive relationships with the reference targets (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), which provides a comprehensive and multidimensional representation of the construct under investigation.
In terms of data processing, the authors started from obtaining the frequency tables and words, concepts, or objects distributions for each open-ended question and for the total image count, and treated the most frequent ones as image variables. This allowed a more detailed assessment of destination image and facilitated statistical comparisons of images among different groups of respondents. Then, different aspects of destination image were measured, on the basis of Echtner and Ritchie's (1993) model. For data analysis, this study used a combination of two software programs, CATPAC and SPSS.

Findings and discussions

In total, 324 valid questionnaires were obtained (for the demographic profile of the respondents see Table 1 on the next page), containing 4,500 images acquired from six open-ended questions.
A preliminary analysis of the data revealed two significant trends: the first is that the respondents often mention composite images (that is, where more than one item appears simultaneously such as «Rich cultural atmosphere»); the second is that sometimes the same image is mentioned by respondents in relation to different continuums: consider, for example, the case of «Rome», mentioned both as an answer to the question «*What images or characteristics come to mind when you think of Italy as a vacation destination*?» and to the question «*Please list any distinctive or unique tourist attractions that you can think of in Italy*». This, suggesting the opportunity to capture the unique, authentic and experiential aspects of the destination image in a more holistic way (Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007).
Figure 3 provides the Attribute/Holistic and Functional/Psychological components of Italy's image as a tourist destination. The images of «Tasty food» («Pizza», «Pasta» and «Wine», in particular, followed by «Olive oil»), «Exquisite architecture», «Sea» and «Sun» are mentioned as the main Italian attractions, that allow Russian tourists to enjoy outstanding views, while living in a friendly and warm atmosphere.

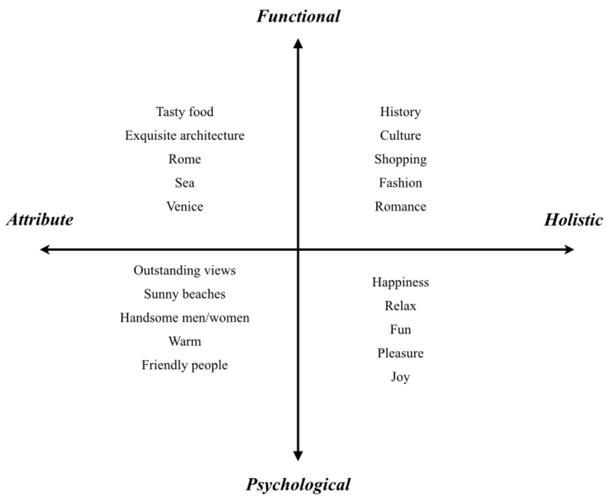

Fig. 3. The Attribute/Holistic and Functional/Psychological components of Italy's destination image.

Variable	Levels	Actual Visitors		Potential Visitors		Missing Values		Whole Sample	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Gender	Male	53	36.3	91	51.7	-	-	144	44.4
	Female	92	63	85	48.3	1	50	178	54.9

	Missing values	1	.7	-	-	1	50	2	.6
	Total	146	100	176	100	2	100	324	100
Age	18-24	82	56.2	114	65.1	1	33.3	197	60.8
	25-34	35	24	35	20	-	-	70	21.6
	35-44	11	7.5	11	6.3	-	-	22	6.8
	45-54	10	6.8	11	6.3	-	-	21	6.5
	55-64	5	3.4	3	1.7	-	-	8	2.5
	65 and older	3	2.1	1	.6	-	-	4	1.2
	Missing values	-	-	-	-	2	66.6	2	.6
	Total	146	100	175	100	3	100	324	100
Travel with	Alone	16	11	25	14.2	1	50	42	13
	Just the partner	11	7.5	18	10.2	-	-	29	9
	With friends	64	43.8	69	39.2	-	-	133	41
	With colleagues	1	.7	5	2.8	-	-	6	1.9
	With family	54	37	58	33	-	-	112	34.6
	Missing values	-	-	1	.6	1	50	2	.6
	Total	146	100	176	100	2	100	324	100
Children	1	17	11.8	15	8.6	-	-	32	9.9
	2	13	9	15	8.6	-	-	28	8.6
	3	6	4.2	5	2.9	-	-	11	3.4
	More than 3	1	.7	1	.6	-	-	2	.6
	None	106	73.6	137	78.7	1	16.6	244	75.3
	Missing values	1	.7	1	.6	5	83.3	7	2.1
	Total	144	100	174	100	6	100	324	100
Job	Student	78	53.8	95	54	1	33.3	174	53.7
	Employee	18	12.4	31	17.6	-	-	49	15.1
	Professional	30	20.7	28	15.9	-	-	58	17.9
	Self-employed	6	4.1	7	4	-	-	13	4.0
	Housewife	4	2.8	5	2.8	-	-	9	2.8
	Enterpreneur	4	2.8	3	1.7	-	-	7	2.2
	Retired	5	3.4	1	.6	-	-	6	1.9
	Unemployed	-	-	5	2.8	-	-	5	1.5
	Other	-	-	1	.6	2	66.6	3	.9
	Total	145	100	176	100	3	100	324	100
Income (RUB)	Up to 350.000	29	19.9	55	31.2	-	-	84	26
	Up to 870.000	15	10.3	17	9.8	-	-	32	9.9
	Up to 1.900.000	8	5.4	9	5.1	-	-	17	5.3
	Up to 3.500.000	2	1.4	2	1.1	-	-	4	1.2
	Up to 7.300.000	2	1.4	-	-	-	-	2	.6
	More than 7.300.000	2	1.4	2	1.1	-	-	4	1.2
	I prefer not to answer	88	60.2	90	51.4	3	100	181	55.8
	Total	146	100	175	100	3	100	324	100
Chi square	Gender	$\chi^2 = 88.42$		df = 4		$p = .000$			
	Age	$\chi^2 = 165.52$		df = 12		$p = .000$			
	Travel with	$\chi^2 = 87.87$		df = 10		$p = .000$			
	Children	$\chi^2 = 53.81$		df = 10		$p = .000$			
	Job	$\chi^2 = 172.79$		df = 18		$p = .000$			
	Income	$\chi^2 = 47.55$		df = 14		$p = .000$			

Table. 1. Respondents' profile

The fascination and variety of the cultural heritage (in particular for what is about the cities of Rome and Venice) also has a strong attraction, due to the highly positive stamp that is conveyed on Italy by its historic wealth. By the same token, an essential role is played by the clear recognition of the legacies of the Roman Empire.

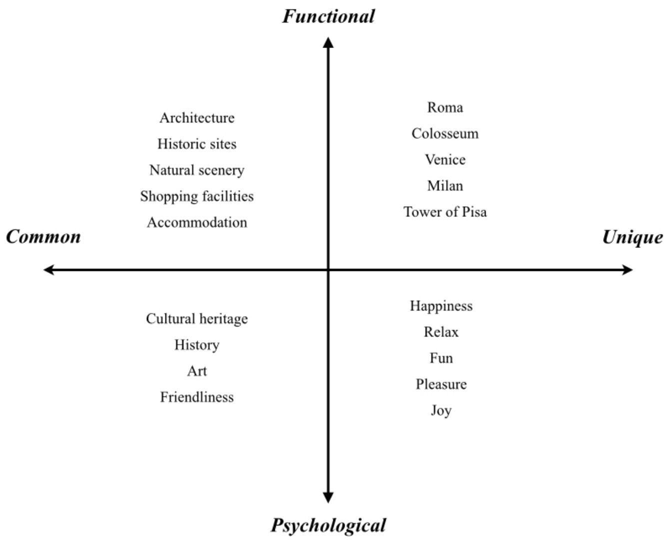

Fig. 4. The Common/Unique and Functional/Psychological components of Italy's destination image.

The right side of Figure 4 presents the main components used by Russian respondents to provide a sampling of the distinctive attributes given for Italy, even showing that «Happiness», «Relax», «Comfort» and «Fun» are found to be the most common moods associated with traveling to the country. The image of «Relax» is strongly connected to those of «Calmness», «Enjoying life» and «Leisure», thus making Italy as a desirable place to travel to, as it is even evidenced by such images as «Place I hope to visit», «I don't want to come back home». In terms of a geographic representation of Italy brand awareness, Coliseum and the Tower of Pisa are seen as the two main Italy icons, while Milan is strongly connected with «Fashion».

Russian travelers consider having a rich cultural heritage and an impressive architecture some common characteristics for tourist destinations, combined with an amazing natural scenery and a rich variety of shopping facilities. Not surprisingly, when in Italy the 37% of their budget is spend on shopping (where fashion and clothing sectors are dominant, representing a total of 76% of the market), 30% on accommodation and 20% on restaurants, while the proportion of purchases made by Russian citizens amounted to 29% in Milan and Rome, to 17% in Florence and to 16% Venice (Bank of Italy, 2015).

Finally, the perceived degree of hospitality is considered a critical competitiveness leverage, in particular in terms of variety and quality of the services provided, their proportion in relation to the costs incurred to benefit from them and the expertise of the tourist operators.

Then, it is of particular concern the circumstance that high costs are considered the main factors that negatively define Italy's image and act as discouragements, as well as some structural travel constraints, such as language barriers and hot temperatures (Figure 5).

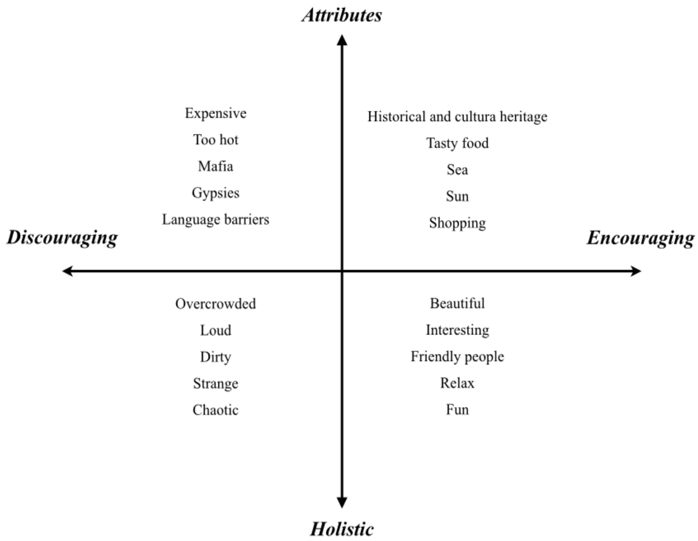

Fig. 5. The Discouraging/Encouraging and Attributes/Holistic components of Italy's destination image.

The concept of hospitality is even declined by respondents into a wider sense, with a degree of discomfort expressed about the country as a whole, in particular for what is about its political management - which makes the country seen as «Overcrowded» «Loud», and

«Dirty», where the images of «Chaos» and «Garbage» are also given – and the system of values, seen as increasingly opaque also because of the presence of «Mafia» and «Thieves».
On the other side, the image Russian outbound tourists hold about Italy is enriched by many encouraging factors, the most frequent being «Tasty food», «Beauty», «Historical and cultural heritage», and «Friendly people», thus making Italy the only place where you can experience a happy, carefree atmosphere, a sort of magic full of charm. With this regard, the circumstance that 94 respondents declared that «No one» negative words would be used to describe Italy as a vacation destination may be of interest too.
From what has been outlined so far, it is clear that to be positioned more effectively on the Russian outbound travel market, efforts need to be concentrated on two levels of intervention. On the one hand, strengthening governance, in order to increase the sense of ease, welcome and comfort that Russian tourists feel when they arrive in Italy, which means first of all specific skills to be reinforced for operators in the sector. In fact, it has to be considered that in Italy most of the causes that produced in many countries a widespread crisis (including the tourism sector) have ancient and deep origins, risking therefore to take a possible dead end way.
With this regard, the main implications under a managerial point of view should regard:

- The awareness that the possession of one of the greatest cultural, artistic and natural heritages in the world does not automatically provide any salvation from the crisis, if not properly protected and placed in the center of a system of exploitation, while being conjugated with a deep respect of the tourist – who should no longer be considered as a "cash cow";
- The inability to work in team, continuing to operate for particularism and using only the unstable revenue as advantage competition;
- The inability to imagine and plan a comprehensive strategy that should provide the right investments and a deep qualification of operators in the sector;
- The consideration of tourism as a business and a benefit for a few and not as a strategic sector of a national economy.

On the other hand, systematic interventions should be adopted to mitigate the effects of structural travel constraints, which undermine Italy’s image in the study- based market, making it less appealing. In particular, we are referring to increasing investments in the logistical and infrastructural system, the standardization of hotel grading systems and aligning them with international standards. With this regard, remarkable is the nature of the Italian accommodation system, which is characterized by several small structures, with a ratio between the number of facilities and the beds ending of 1/30 **(**Combined Report Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Italian Embassy in Russia, 2014). A number which is lower than in Greece (1/40), Germany (1/65), Spain (1/74) and France (1/176) and that, nowadays, acts as an obstacle in terms of attractiveness in the eyes of Russian tourists, who requires specific and exclusive services with a higher quality. Not surprisingly, the touristic flow distribution in Italy confirms these trends: in fact, the most visited regions are those with large hotel structures (often with specific services dedicated to the Russian tourists) and with direct flights to the Russian Federation (as Emilia Romagna, Lombardy, Liguria and Veneto). Then, a proper destination marketing plan is required, in order to make this Italian peculiarity been perceived by tourists as an enhancement of the feature of uniqueness, associated with the variety of the offer; in this terms, Italian tourist offer would be conveyed in a higly personalized, genuine way, deeply moving but also attractive and full of meaning for Russian tourists.

Conclusions and limitations

To be successfully promoted in a market, «a destination must be favorably differentiated from its competition, or positively positioned, in the minds of the consumers» (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003, p. 37). A desirable differentiation and positioning can be achieved by a destination's marketing organization by creating and managing the perceptions, or images, that potential travelers hold about the destination (Reilly, 1990). This is the reason why destination image measurement has been of great interest to tourism researchers and practitioners: in fact, identifying, analyzing and sharing among DMO internal stakeholders all the knowledge, beliefs, ideas, impressions, perceptions and intentions that actual and potential visitors have about a destination, encourages alliances (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014), as well as the exchange of resources and skills (Haugland, Ness, Grønseth, & Aarstad, 2011) along the value chain, ensuring that the destination offer is perceived as a rich, but integrated combination of products and services, in a structured product portfolio (Bramwell & Lane, 2000).

The present study attempted to obtain a collective mental picture of Italy as a leisure destination among past or potential Russian long-haul outbound travelers. This is due, on the one hand, to the potential for development of this market (Russian GDP is expected to grow again in the course of 2017, while Russian tourism potential is estimated by UNWTO as 47 million international travelers by 2020) and on the other, to the absence, in the authors' knowledge, of studies analyzing Italy in a country-specific perspective, taking into consideration the growing levels of competition between countries on the Mediterranean.

For study purposes, the Echtner and Ritchie model (1991; 1993) was adopted due to its ability to provide a comprehensive and intuitive representation of the different components which contribute to defining the destination image. The model, however, was implemented, compared to its original format, with more emphasis on the role that distance and travel constraints play in defining the perception of a tourist offering. This allowed to achieve a measurement of the destination image that is not only denotative, but also connotative, thus reducing the risk of misinterpreting the most significant attributes emerging during the study.

Findings of this study highlights that overall Russian outbound tourists' perceptions of Italy are of warmness, happiness, enjoyment and fun. In particular, the «Relax» image seems to have turned into part of Italy's unique appeal to the Russian market and may well become the expectation held by Russian tourists who visit the Italy for the first time, especially connected to food, culture and fashion.

In contrast, there is a growing concern among Russian tourists for certain aspects of their stay such as, for example, chaos and disorganization or, for the tourist offer in particular, the hospitality system that is not tailored to their requirements and expectations.

The risk is that an increasingly evident gap will open up between the secondary and primary image of the country due to the failure to take full advantage of Italy's immense historical, cultural and scenic heritage. In this sense, a consolidation of the system of governance of the national offer and the definition of policies aimed at strengthening a more efficient allocation of resources could allow a series of very flexible and tailored products/experiences to be created, even in order to increase destination competitiveness. Moreover, this could minimize the threats of a slowdown in tourist flows coming from such new challenges that are emerging, particularly in Europe and the Mediterranean shore, and that are linked to the extension of international tensions by unpredictable implications both under a political (consider, for instance, the Russia-Ukraine crisis with the EU-US sanctions and the Isis attacks in Islamic countries with the increasingly frequent threats to the West), economic (see the crisis of Euro area) and social (migrants' emergency) points of view.

In such an uncertain context, Travel & Tourism has much more to be considered not just as a part of the wider economic system of a country, but rather «the set of factors and policies that enable the sustainable development of the country» (UNWTO, 2015, p. 14), as well as an effective way for encouraging contacts and exchanges between people, making they learn about and understand each other, while nurturing mutual respect and tolerance (UNWTO & WTTC, 2015). That is to say, each person travelling, in the past as nowadays, has the best opportunity to form his own vision of what surrounds us, living in an increasingly globalized world, where information is often manipulated and used as an ultimate weapon.

The authors see at least two important practical implications from this study. First, the captured holistic and unique dimensions provided image components which were useful for differentiating Italy from a competitive set of destinations, as well as for providing effective guidance on alliance building and travel itinerary design. In fact, when measuring the image at a macro or national level (Kotler, Bowen, Makens, Xie, & Liang, 2006), answers on what unique sites and attractions Russian leisure travelers associate with Italy may be used to reflect tourists' collective awareness of its travel products, where destination awareness has been found to be a critical prerequisite of destination image and a part of tourists' brand knowledge, without which their image will not exist in the first place (Keller, 1993). The second practical implication is related to the overall image of Italy. In fact, even though this study dealt with the image of Italy as a travel destination among Russian leisure travelers, findings highlight how social representations of Italy as a country can hardly be separated in the respondents' mind. It could be useful to find out to what degree, and if it might reflect a rather imbalanced media coverage.

To balance out the present findings, the following limitations have to be considered, although they are beyond the control of the researchers.

The most significant of which is in the choice of the sample and the mode of questionnaire administration, which make it impossible to fully generalize the results. Secondly, with most non-longitudinal image studies, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the answers provided are influenced by diplomatic relations, the period of time in question, the long distance between Italy and Russia, as well as other environmental factors.

Finally, in order for the framework which has been defined to be considered comprehensive, a functional study would have to be developed to measure Italy's image with the various parties who contribute to qualifying and diffusing it, such as social networks and actors in the tourism supply chain, whose role as "image makers" is widely recognized in international literature (Llodrà-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015).

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