

American Student's Thoughts on Italy

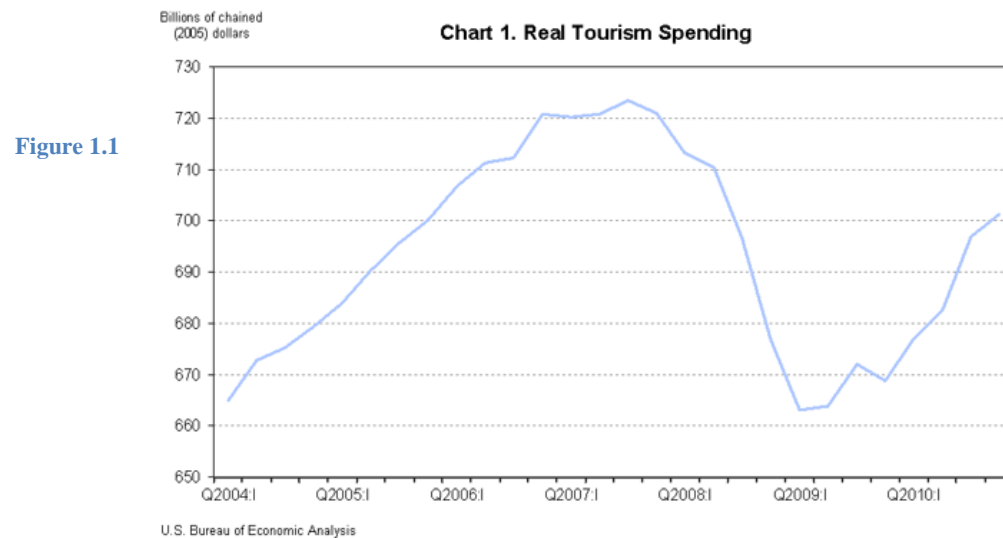
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America and Italy have had an involved history together. A history tied together through the presence of Italian-Americans in search of a better life, one that gives the basis for the American attitudes toward the Italian identity. These attitudes gave birth to an array of negative stereotypes (the “guido” for example) for Italians among the general population; however, the current diplomatic relationship between Italy and the United States remains a positive one. Both the U.S. and Italy are allies through NATO and collaborate on important issues in the UN. This strong diplomatic relationship between the two countries has influenced a desire for many to travel abroad. Unfortunately, American travel in Italy has been slowly decreasing. In 2007 it enjoyed a market share of 19.3% of all American tourism abroad. In 2009 the number shrank to 17.5%. (U.S. Residents Outbound Report 2008, International Trade Administration) The question then remains—what is stopping Americans from travelling to Italy or better yet, is there something stopping Americans from travelling to Italy? A questionnaire designed to highlight the attitudes of an average American university student towards Italy will aid in the determination of possible cause for this decline. With the help of the survey results of 800 American students and other sources, it can be argued that American opinions on various aspects of the Italian image need to change in order to increase American tourism in Italy, by examining the economy, security, and cultural differences of the two countries.

In recent years the American economy has been on the decline. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis report for 2010, Americans spent a total of

\$75.1 billion in imported travel costs across the board. In 2008 the number was \$79.7 billion, this illustrates the decline in travel by \$4.6 billion over a two-year period. Further evidence is provided by the information in Figure 1.1, emphasizing the decline in American Tourism between 2007 (the beginnings of the recession) and 2010.



These numbers accumulated with the general deficit of \$497.8 billion, or 3.4% of the GDP in 2010 clearly show that the United States economy is still in its recession, although on the recovery. What this means for the average American consumer is a decrease in travel between 2007 and 2010, ultimately including Italy in this decline.

In order to understand this decrease one must look at the consumer doing the spending. Thanks to the combined efforts of the Italian Embassy/Consulate/Italian National Tourism Agency (ENIT) a report was released on American tourism in Italy.

It says that 71% of the tourists in 2009 were earning between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year, thus classifying them as upper middle class. About 52% of all the tourists had at least a college degree and 62% fell between the ages of 25 to 54 years. A survey done by the International Trade Administration in the U.S. also adds that 42% of travelers in 2009 do so alone, while 64% are traveling with a spouse, family, or friends. Taking this information into account, we can assume that the average traveler has graduated from college, is about 30 years old, is traveling with one or numerous companions, and is making about \$65,000 per year.

In relation to the cost of traveling to Italy, it can get relatively expensive. During the high tourist seasons an airplane ticket in coach can cost an average of \$2,700. Once in Italy the family or individual usually chooses the option of an entire vacation package, including accommodations, tours, museum fees, travel expenses etc. these packages can range from \$1,500 to \$3,000 depending on the cities that they visit, the amount of days they stay, and the activities that they do per day. Added up, a single vacation can cost about \$5,700 per person, and this is not including souvenirs and food costs. In addition to the cost worries of the consumer, the exchange rate is also taken into consideration. Since its inception in 1999 the Euro has been a powerful currency maintaining its hold as being stronger than the dollar for most of its history. The highest point it hit was in 2008 when the exchange rate reached \$1 = €0.625, meaning that those \$5,700 would have only been worth €3562.50. In a time where families are worried about making car payments, house payments, paying taxes,

and keeping a job in order to keep up with these necessary costs, a luxurious Italian vacation takes a backseat until it can be afforded again.

In the mind of the average American student these economic reasons are given as the most responsible for the hindrance of American tourism in Italy. By a majority (64.39%) students chose the American economic crisis as the biggest obstacle to traveling to Italy, followed by the second highest choice of the currency exchange rate with 16.10% of the responses. Though it is not nearly as high as the economic crisis choice, when paired together they illustrate the attitude that economic reasons play an important role in the decision to travel.

What has become more salient in the minds of many Americans—especially since the attacks on the World Trade Towers on September 11th, 2001—is the issue of security and safety abroad. With all that is going on in the world, such as the collapsing governments in Egypt and Tunisia, it is understandable for Americans to be hesitant when it comes to traveling, but is there a security risk for American tourists in Italy? The US Department of State does not seem to echo this feeling of heightened security for Europe because as of the 31st of January 2011 the alleged terrorist threats in Europe have been lifted (Consular Affairs). The US Department of State is entrusted with America's safety. Making an effort to research on their website about what is going on in a country before planning a trip allows for the American traveler to consider their options and possibly even change their opinions. It is now safe for Americans to travel to Italy, but there remain three main security

factors that continue to deter this travel: the unstable Italian political system, terrorist threats, and personal security.

In the survey, completed by 800 American students, it was found that the top four reasons for the tourist decline are as follows: the American economic crisis (68%), the currency exchange from the dollar to the Euro (16%), the threat of terrorism in Europe (6%), and the unstable Italian political system (3%). As previously mentioned, the economic crisis in America is first, but out of the four top issues, two of them are related to security: terrorism threats and unstable politics. Italy, has not presented itself for some time with as stable a government as say France or England, so why do Americans only now fear for their security when it comes to traveling to Italy? According to 57% of the 800 American students who took our survey, Italy doesn't promote its image well enough in the states, so Americans have to rely on what the media says. When Berlusconi won the vote of confidence back in mid-December 2010, there were riots, strikes, and rallies, but what the media does not say is that they were controlled. In an article from CNN it was portrayed simply as anarchy, "There was everything from small fires to people charging down via del Corso" (CNN). Violence stopped during the actual protesting of Berlusconi's confidence vote, however, the Carabinieri and other forms of protectors remained, giving further to the image of a riot. At the time of the protests, many American's in Italy did not know what was happening, so they did not think their security was threatened. Then in the aftermath they heard on the news, or through the papers,

taking in the embellishments of the media. This is not to say that Americans have never experienced strikes before. Recent movements in America have had a more peaceful tone such as the protesting of immigration laws in downtown Chicago (CNN). Italy should be aware that they are being watched and assessed by their current events, and if it remains to pose a danger to the security to Americans then they will not travel there.

Because potential American tourists or study abroad students have easy access to current events, it becomes easy to relate to situations involving others that affect their personal security. When asked if the recent trial of Amanda Knox would affect study abroad in Italy 27% of respondents said that it wouldn't affect their choice at all, 13% thought it would affect their decision, and 47% said that it would affect their choice a little but would not be a determining factor. It is understandable that her trial has some impact on them because she was an American student in Italy at the time of her conviction and potential study abroad students can relate to her, but the desire to study abroad must overpower this case because 66% of the students who took our survey have been abroad at some point or another.

Donald Trump joined the propaganda of the case by proposing that Americans should boycott Italy until Amanda Knox is released from prison (Seattle Post). This boycott depicts Italy negatively. It is portrayed as an unjust place where innocent Americans are persecuted, giving Italy a sense of foreboding. According to the survey, when asked about the aftermath of Trump's boycott, 41% said that it would

hinder the collaboration between Italy and the United States only a little bit, however 24% said it would definitely affect the collaboration of the two countries. Even though most say it would have a small effect, combining the two shows 65% of the participants thinking that it at least will have an effect. This is significant in the fact that one influential figure can affect the thoughts of a large amount of people in this matter.

When American's travel abroad, it is recommended to check with the Department of State's website, <http://travel.state.gov>, in order to see if there are any current warnings or suggestions when traveling to a current place. In the part on Italy there is a crime section, which tells you what crimes are most popular. Italy's three main crimes that travelers are warned against are pick-pocketing, theft from parked cars, and purse snatching (travel.state.gov). Compared to many other countries, such as Tunisia to which American's are advised simply to not go, Italy's crimes are easily prevented by staying attentive when in the country. There are some programs specifically for American's such as the Smart Traveler enrollment program that allows the local embassy information about the traveler's whereabouts, thus giving these officials the opportunity to assist said travelers in case of a political uproar or any other breach of security (U.S. bureau). This program is moderately new, but with time it could be successful in creating less anxiety when traveling abroad for many American tourists, in turn creating more travel.

The weariness by Americans for not traveling to Italy in the recent years might also be related to the afore mentioned warning placed in October 2010 from the Bureau of Consular Affairs in the U.S. Department of State regarding the potential terrorist attacks in Europe towards Americans, however, when asked about the chance to take a job in Europe over 88% of participants said that they would leave the US. The strong support illustrated by this number shows that Americans are willing to leave everything they have in America to take a job that is in Europe, which making the American dream a reality. Americans, just like anyone from any other nation, want to do better in life. Of this 88% that were willing to live and work outside of the US in Europe, only 23% said that they would take the opportunity in Italy as compared to a 28% that would take the opportunity in the United Kingdom, which is thought to be the closest ally to America. The question then becomes why are people willing to live in Italy, but are not willing to vacation there?

When it comes to international politics, most American Students are uninformed, unless they have reason to take a special interest, such as a parent, or if it is their major. It is for the most part common knowledge that the European Union exists. This can be shown by the 75.25% of students who are aware of the existence of the European Parliament. Their knowledge, however, of the European Commission is very little with 63.98% of respondents who do not know of it. These contradictory numbers back up the hypothesis that students are only mildly aware of the European Union. Similarly, about half (49.90%) of our participants believe that

the European Union only has some influence in international politics. How is this possible when the European Union is the embodiment of an international organization in which most of the countries of Europe participate? These inaccuracies of the common American student may be one other reason why the travel to Italy has dropped. That is to say that in recent months the Italian government has shown signs of weakness and instability. As previously mentioned, the actions of Silvio Berlusconi—Italy's Prime Minister—have caused riots in the streets and shouts for his dismissal. Perhaps as in North Africa, the students and maybe the general public believe that these signs of instability will escalate into a fully failing government, dangerous both physically and economically, and that the European Union would not be able to help. This attitude may result in the reconsideration of travel and study in Italy as long as the governments both on the peninsula and across the Mediterranean are in an uproar, however what must be understood is that the strikes in Italy, Germany, France, etc. are not of the same nature because they are democratic countries unlike Egypt, Libya, etc. These European strikes are geared towards social and political policy reforms characteristic of a democratic nation; therefore, the governments of these European nations will not fall.

Throughout American cities there are numerous billboard and poster advertisements for new movies, books, and films, but the most relevant to the research are those that advertise vacations. The strange thing about the vacation

campaigns is that tourist campaigns are mostly geared to tropical places such as the Bahamas or the Caribbean and not towards Italy or other European countries that have just as many beautiful qualities (destination 360). This could be the fault of both America and Italy; America for not putting Italy out there, and Italy for not promoting its image enough. When asked if Italy promotes itself in the United States, only 34% of the sample said that it does, compared to the 57% that said it does not. If Italy wants more American tourists, they have to be willing to create advertisements that reach the United States and lure in potential tourists. Luckily, foundations and schools in Italy and America are working on changing this: the Sons of Italy Foundation (SOI), the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), and American universities with campuses in Italy, like Loyola University Chicago, are among the many.

Although the students who took our survey think that Italy doesn't promote itself well in America, almost half (46%) of our sample is aware of the commercial campaigns and promotions such as tourist destinations, study abroad opportunities, etc. for Italy. This is a high number, and since a number of students who took our survey have studied abroad, they have had guidance from a university or high school. Loyola University Chicago is one of many schools with a study abroad program in Italy, and they are always advertising new ways to encourage students to study abroad because of the experience they will gain while studying abroad. Loyola is a Jesuit University, so the university's belief is that a well-rounded student is more likely to

succeed. Studying abroad makes learning about new cultures a reality, something that many, without studying or traveling abroad, might never experience.

The Sons of Italy Foundation is an American-Italian foundation that gives scholarships for study programs in Italy, internships in Italy, and they also have a link on their website promoting the cultural relation between the two countries (SOI). The SOI Foundation's programs are great ways to get the word out to travel to Italy because they are promoting from within America. The National Italian American Foundation is another foundation that is willing to help the two countries promote an attractive image. On the website for the NIAF, they have everything ranging from an Italian American reading list to resources to find internships, volunteer work, and regular jobs in Italy (NIAF). It is difficult to find a place to start when looking to travel abroad, and sometimes guidance is needed for this search. The NIAF foundation makes life easier for a lot of people by making these options clearer for Americans, and therefore promoting more tourism in Italy.

In order to promote involvement in world affairs, both America and Italy along with all other industrialized countries such as Japan, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Canada, and Russia, belong to the G8 'Major Economies Forum' (g8italia2009.it). This agreement has provided much relief and support for recent issues around the globe, such as raising money for the earthquakes in Aquila, Abruzzo, and determining factors of efficient global energy use. Unfortunately this group does not have a concrete structure and guidelines like those of the United

Nations. This group assists a number of nations, but 61% of our sample has never heard of it, which highlights the fact that images are not well promoted. Apart from the image that Italy carries throughout the world, advocating positive images is perhaps the single most important thing Italy can do to attract a larger tourist crowd.

Italy's "image" is seen as the famed home of art, music, food, and family. What changes from country to country is how they receive the information about Italy, thus giving a unique perception of its image. It could be through the classroom, through the family, and even through the media. In America the perception is brought by an integration of the three. Yet, as is the nature of America, the students are exposed to so many different cultures and traditions that each of those cultures is boiled down to stereotypes, making them easily accessible in the minds of Americans. It is the cultures that are more prominent in the American society that get the most recognition. The border that the United States shares with Mexico brings the Mexicans into focus as the most diffused culture throughout America. Every school in the country has a Spanish program, and Spanish words even permeate into English. It is the ease of learning Spanish and its usefulness that attracts students all over the nation to learn it. Italian and Italy are left at the wayside along with French, and German. Italy, being far away in Europe, then becomes this place where people's families are from, where people eat well, and where the enticing Tuscan sun resides.

In our survey we asked which aspect of studying in Italy would be most attractive to an average American student. The most chosen answer (37.5%) was

because it would give them a chance to live differently for a year. The second most chosen was the cultural diversity with 21.33%. These are telling numbers in that the highest two responses do not have anything in particular to do with Italy. A student could study anywhere in the world and get a chance to live differently for a year, even within the United States. The same goes for experiencing some sort of cultural diversity. Perhaps this means that the answer would be the same for any other country if presented to students. The reason we hesitate from making this assumption is that there was a small percentage (9.27%) that listed for the most part that the mixture of history, culture, and language is what would attract a student to Italy, not any of the given choices alone. These answers at least provide a motivation to the more generic answers in the majority. One of the “other” answers had a particularly insightful response.

“Unfortunately, I think that American students have a skewed idea of what Italy is. What comes from movies/books/etc. This idea that Americans have is one that I believe to be very much "Godfather-esque" and is entirely different than what students studying abroad actually encounter upon arrival.”

It is this principle brought forward by the participant, which illuminates the key to the American attitude towards Italy. It is a grand perception, spoon-fed in a subtle, almost unknowing way.

Although there are many cases that impose a risk on Americans, such as the terrorist threats in Tunisia, sometimes, the security of Americans isn't the fault of the country that they are traveling to; sometimes it is the fault of the way Americans

comport themselves that creates a stigma for them thus, creates a risk for their security. One example is MTV's *Jersey Shore*. On this show the "guidos" spend their time in clubs, getting intoxicated, and being promiscuous. What they do not realize is that they are representing both Italy and America because of their Italian-American descent. This image makes Americans seem easier to harass when they travel because foreigners think Americans, students especially, just want to party and not learn about the culture Italy has to offer. Unfortunately it also depicts Italians in the same way in the eyes of Americans, which might deter potential tourists. People need to know that Americans in Italy don't represent the stereotype they see in the media and vice versa. *Jersey Shore* provides a changing view that surpasses the causes of economy and security. Stereotypes are the driving force behind a person's socio-psychological make-up. Judgments are made, and actions are taken according to the certain image provided. Once security becomes less of a concern, and the economy grows richer more Americans will come to the fated Italy, but it will still be for superficial reasons, with an extremely limited expectation based on stereotype. If these images of *The Godfather*, and the mafia or *Jersey Shore* and the "guido" are not eradicated then no amount of economic healing or peace among nations will attract the American people to discover the true Italian spirit.