Do you sound Italian?
Assessing the effectiveness of Italian Sounding as a marketing strategy

Elena La Rocca
European Master in Business Studies

University of Kassel
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**Abstract**

Italian Sounding is a phenomenon that consists of giving products names, slogans, pictures and color that are typically associated to the peninsula. This negatively impacts the Italian economy and its exports as it sells goods as ‘made in Italy’, in spite of their non-authenticity.

This exposé is meant to provide an overview of the subsequent thesis that will discuss Italian Sounding. As an introduction to the topic, the problem will be stated more clearly in order to explain the purpose of the study. A review of literature will then illustrate contributions that are relevant to the topic as to contextualize Italian Sounding as a marketing strategy. The methodology pursued to empirically explore the phenomenon will consists of a research questionnaire distributed in Germany, France and the U.S.

The ultimate scope is to assess the effectiveness of Italian Sounding as a marketing strategy by investigating the motivators that induce consumers to purchase Italian sounding goods.
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List of Abbreviations

COO – Country Of Origin
CBO – Country of Brand Origin
DOC – Denominazione d’ Origine Controllata
DOP – Denominazione d’ Origine Protetta
IGP – Indicazione Geografica Protetta
STG – Specialità Tradizionale Garantita
UIBM – Ufficio Italiano Brevetti e Marchi (IPTO – Italian Patent and Trademark Office)
1. Introduction

In recent years, attention has increasingly been drawn on Italian food counterfeit. From a legal point of view, there are two types of food frauds: on the one hand sanitary, on the other hand commercial ones. The former can be particularly dangerous for consumers’ health and includes the alteration, adulteration and sophistication of the product. The latter type is defined as falsification or counterfeit (Semeraro, 2011). Italian Sounding can be described as a way of counterfeiting food products in that it consists of giving an Italian features to food products that are not truly Italian (Cembalo, Cicia, Del Giudice, Scarpa & Tagliaferro, 2008).

More precisely, this is done by choosing brand names, pictures and colors that are typically associated with the peninsula. In addition to that, sometimes trademark and quality certification logos are printed on the package, even if the product itself does not correspond to that quality standard. Common raped cheese, for example, is sold as Grana Padano DOP (Platania & Privitera, 2007). According to the Direzione Generale per la lotta alla contraffazione – UIBM (2014), the current economic value of counterfeited food products is estimated more than double that of Italian food exports. Worldwide, Italian Sounding in year 2010 was valued € 54 billion.

Italian Sounding is a tangled issue, especially by considering that nowadays global sourcing is a common practice. Supply chains are sometimes spread across countries, thus, it might be hard to determine the true Country of Origin (COO) of a product. As a matter of fact, precisely defining and delimiting the phenomenon of Italian Sounding can be more difficult than it might seem. Interestingly, some authors precisely suggest that companies located in countries that do not benefit from a positive country image, can take advantage of the positive perception associated to another nation (Zeugner-Roth, Diamantopoulos, & Montesino, 2008). This would, indeed, speak for foreign branding; a suggestion that mandates a more in depth analysis of the Italian Sounding issue.

1.1. Problem Statement

As stated above, Italian Sounding leads to a loss of sales of authentic Italian products, since it appropriates market that could, in principle, be acquired by Italian exports (Atkins, 2015). Italy is trying to identify the measures that need to be implemented to counteract this phenomenon. At the same time, however, there is little research about the efficacy of a marketing strategy based on Italian Sounding. Studying the reasons underlying the popularity
of Italian sounding products among consumers could shed some more light on possible ways of counteracting this phenomenon.

1.2. Purpose

The aim of this paper is to analyze Italian Sounding as marketing strategy. An evaluation of its effectiveness will be pursued with the scope of understanding whether and why consumers are motivated to buy Italian sounding food products. The attempt is to investigate if making references to Italy when marketing a product – in spite of its non-authenticity – induces consumers to prefer that good over a similar one that does not explicitly display Italian features.
2. Outline of the Thesis

Introduction - This chapter introduces the topic by defining the Italian Sounding phenomenon. Moreover, current data about its economic impact on the Italian agro-economy will be provided, which will highlight the relevance of the topic. Additionally, the purpose of this research will be explained.

Literature Review – This chapter will initially define the different types of food counterfeit and then summarize previous researches conducted on the subject. Contributions in literature that are relevant to the topic will be summarized. The major topics reviewed will concern Italian Sounding, Country of Origin, Brand Equity, stereotypes and consumer behavior.

Methodology – In this chapter the hypotheses underlying the analysis will be presented. Research design will be outlined as well as its implementation through a questionnaire. Data collection methods will be explained and validity and reliability will be also discussed.

Analysis of data – This chapter will report and analyze the data collected. Results obtained from both, the desk and field research will be reviewed.

Conclusion – This chapter will conclude with a summary of the work. Implications arising from the study will be discussed with the scope of providing an answer to the research question. An overview of the main findings, final remarks and limitations will be presented, too.

2.1. Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 – Introduction
   1.1. The Economic Impact of Italian Sounding
   1.2. Scope
Chapter 2 – Literature Review
   2.1. Food Fraud and Counterfeit – Definitions
       2.1.1. Sanitary food frauds
2.2.2. Commercial food frauds

2.2. Italian Sounding

2.2.1. Legal Framework

2.3. Italian Food: Identity, Quality and Influences

2.3.1. Italian Ethnic Identity

2.3.2. The Quality of Italian Food

2.3.3. The Influence of Italian Cuisine across Europe and in the US

2.4. Perceptions of Italy and Stereotypes

2.5. Country of Origin Effect

2.6. Brand Equity

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1. Hypotheses

3.2. Research Question and Design

3.2. Country Selection

3.2.1. Germany

3.2.2. France

3.2.3. The United States

3.3. Italian Sounding Products Selection

3.4. The Questionnaire

Chapter 4 – Distribution and Data Collection

Chapter 5 – Analysis of Empirical Findings

5.1. Analysis of Quantitative Research Findings

5.2. Analysis of Qualitative Research Findings

5.3. Discussion and Interpretation

Chapter 6 – Conclusions

6.1. Summary of work

6.2. Conclusions

6.3. Implications and Final Remarks

6.4. Limitations and Future Research

Chapter 7 – Bibliography

Chapter 8 – Appendices
2.2. Literature Review

The ultimate purpose of this thesis is to assess the effectiveness of Italian Sounding as a marketing strategy. In order to do so, it is first necessary to understand why consumers might opt for an Italian sounding food brand. The motivational drivers of consumption choices can be multiple: perceptions of quality, stereotypical associations, affinity to a country and brand equity are just some examples of possible reasons underlying purchase decisions. An extensive literature review will, therefore, discuss the various factors that possibly influence consumers’ perceptions and choices. The analysis of different motivators is preparatory to the empirical verification of these by means of the questionnaire. An overview of the most relevant academic articles that ground this study follows; a more comprehensive review of literature will be included in the subsequent thesis work.

2.2.1. Food fraud and Italian Sounding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Relevant Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Fraud; Italian Sounding</td>
<td>Made in Eataly: identità e falsificazione</td>
<td>Magagnoli, S. (2013)</td>
<td>The author summarizes recent data related to Italian Sounding, describes food fraud, reports the historic background of food counterfeit and discusses the various aspects of the phenomenon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italian Sounding</td>
<td>Food Fraud; Italian Sounding</td>
<td>– 93.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Italian Sounding</strong></td>
<td><strong>Food Fraud; Italian Sounding</strong></td>
<td><strong>Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Posibilities and purposes of internet usage: authentic and fake Italian food products</td>
<td>Frodi alimentari: aspetti tecnici e giuridici (Unpublished specialization course dissertation)</td>
<td>This paper provides an overview of the legislation concerning food counterfeit. Historic developments in the market for food counterfeits, information about the types of food fraud are also presented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Agroforestal and Environmental Sciences and Technologies - “Mediterranea” University of Reggio Calabria</td>
<td>Semeraro, A. M. (2011).</td>
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<tr>
<td>A survey based on the U.S. market showed that most consumers prefer pasta that has been adapted to local preferences. Italian sounding products are considered as substitutes of authentic Italian ones and Americans do not seem to attribute much importance to the phenomenon of agropiracy.</td>
<td>Beyond agropiracy: the case of Italian pasta in the United States retail market</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agribusiness 24(3), 403 – 413</td>
<td><strong>Italian Sounding</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The market of food</td>
<td>La crescita della contraffazione</td>
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<td>Censis (2009)</td>
<td><strong>Italian Sounding</strong></td>
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<td>43° Rapporto annuale sulla</td>
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</table>
2.2.2. Italian food: quality, identity and influence.

| Topic                  | Title                                                                 | Author          | Source                                      | Relevant Contribution                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------|****************************************************************-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Italian Food; Europe   | From migrant food to lifestyle cooking: the career of Italian cuisine in Europe | Thoms, U. (2011)| Retrieved online September, 10 2015, from http://ieg-ego.eu/ | This paper analyses the development of eating habits in Europe due to the influence of Italian cuisine. Italian food spread across EU countries – as well as the United States – as a consequence of migration and foreign trade. The popularity of Italian restaurants is also attributable to Italian cuisine seen as being traditional, healthy and tasty. |
| Italian Food; France   | Quel shock! the italianization of French cuisine.                      | O’Neill, M. (1994, October 5) | Retrieved online September, 5 2015, from http://www.nytimes.com | This article describes how Italian cuisine was introduced in France and reviews its effects on French cuisine.                                                                                                                              |
| Italian Food; Ethnic   | Food fights at the EU table: the gastronomic                          | Castellanos, E., & Bergstresser, S. M. | European Studies 22, 179 – 202. | The authors claimed that national cuisine is what unifies Italians, an otherwise rather heterogeneous and                                                                                                                 |

Counterfeits is ever increasing; its value in 2007 equaled € 159 millions. More precisely, the market of Italian sounding products was estimated to be around € 60 billions.
| **Identity** | assertion of Italian distinctiveness | (2006) | divided population. Italian food – pasta in particular – is seen as a statement of national identity, and Italians themselves think this is what the whole population has in common. |
| **Italian Food; Quality** | Export behavior of Italian food firms: Does product quality matter? | Curzi, D., & Olper, A. (2012) | Food Policy 37(5), 493 – 503 | This study demonstrates the importance of quality for companies exporting Italian food. Higher export performance is related to the use of higher-quality inputs, thus, to goods that have a higher quality and price. |
| **Italian Food; Quality** | The perception of food quality. Profiling Italian consumers. | Mascarello, G., Pinto, A., Parise, N., Crovato, S., & Ravarotto, L. (2015). | Appetite 89(1), 175 – 182. | This research shows that the perceived quality of a product influences consumers’ buying and consumption decisions. Product quality is interfered, first, through the organoleptic characteristics (e.g., freshness, taste), second, according to methods of production and location and, third, through the price of the good and its brand. |
| **Italian Food; Perceptions of Italy** | L’arte del cum vivere: comportamenti, attese, valori condivisi degli italiani a tavola | Censis (2003) | | This paper reports the perception of foreigners of the Italian cuisine and food culture. A sample of foreign journalists was chosen as representative of their compatriots and interviewed to understand other countries’ perceptions of Italian.
This paper reports the perceptions of consumers in London with respect to Italian food products. To summarize, “Made in Italy” is a sign for quality; Italian cuisine is considered to be tasty and of high quality. Moreover, it is generally associated with pizza, pasta, Parmiggiano and mozzarella cheese. Respondents to the survey also claimed they would not buy Italian sounding products as these do not correspond to the quality associated with authentic ones.

### 2.2.3. Perceptions of Italy and country stereotypes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Relevant Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Baloglu, S.,</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Italy; Country Stereotypes</td>
<td>Commodified identities: The myth of Italian food in the United States</td>
<td>Girardelli, D. (2004)</td>
<td>Journal of Communication Inquiry 28(4), 307 – 324</td>
<td>The study analyses how Italian food is perceived in the United States. The strategies used by an Italian restaurant chain to communicate “Italianicity”, thus, promote the association with Italy include the use of stereotypes. A total of seven non-verbal strategies has been identified such as the use of the colors of the Italian flag, the use of fresh vegetables and the use of themes associated with romanticism and family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Italy</td>
<td>Tourism destination images of Turkey, Egypt, Greece, and Italy as perceived by US-based tour operators and travel agents</td>
<td>&amp; Mangaloglu, M. (2001)</td>
<td>Management 22(1), 1 – 9</td>
<td>The study provides insight about the perceptions of Italy as a travel destination. In contrast to the other Mediterranean countries, destination image of Italy was mainly characterized by “food, cuisine, pasta, wine”. Remarkably, food associations were more relevant for Italy than for the other destinations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study discusses how country stereotypes affect brand evaluation by consumers, regardless of conscious intentions. The authors distinguish between functional and emotional country stereotypes; whilst the former influences cognitive brand evaluations, the latter leads to affective perceptions of a brand. Hence, Country of Origin cues can spontaneously and unconsciously trigger country stereotypes. Their effect on consumers’ product evaluation depends on whether brand communication is congruent with the stereotype evoked.

2.2.4. Country of origin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Relevant Contribution</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country of Origin</td>
<td>Gains and losses from the misperception of brand origin: The role of brand strength and country-of-origin image</td>
<td>Balabanis, G., &amp; Diamantopoulos, A. (2011)</td>
<td>Journal of International Marketing 19(2), 95 - 116</td>
<td>The research conducted shows that the association of a brand with an incorrect Country of Origin is detrimental to the brand. The same holds true for consumers’ inability to determine the Country of Origin of a brand at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>The country of</td>
<td>Eder, N. C.</td>
<td>Norges</td>
<td>The country of origin acts as an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of Origin; Foreign Branding</td>
<td>Foreign branding and its effects of product perceptions and attitudes.</td>
<td>Leclerc, F., Schmitt, B. H., &amp; Dubé, L. (1994)</td>
<td>Journal of Marketing Research 31(2), 263 – 270.</td>
<td>Experiments conducted in this study show that foreign branding – here, French branding – not only triggers hedonic perceptions but it is more effective than Country of Origin information. This may be due to different associations resulting from hearing a foreign sounding brand name than reading about the good’s provenance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of Origin; Brand Equity</td>
<td>Home country image, country brand equity and consumers' product preferences: An empirical study</td>
<td>Zeugner-Roth, K. P., Diamantopoulos, A., &amp; Montesino, M. A. (2008)</td>
<td>Management International Review 48(5), 577 – 602.</td>
<td>The findings of this study underline that the way in which consumers perceive quality, their loyalty and the associations/awareness of a product are influenced by the country to which the good is associated. Furthermore, the</td>
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</table>
authors suggest that a possible way to improve a company’s Brand Equity consists in adopting a strategy that exploits the positive image associated to another country by using a foreign sounding brand name.


2.2.5. Brand equity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Relevant Contribution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Equity</td>
<td>Measuring brand equity across products and markets</td>
<td>Aaker, D. A. (1996)</td>
<td>California Management Review 38(3), 102 – 120</td>
<td>In his paper, Aaker proposes ten measures of brand equity according to its four dimensions: brand loyalty, brand image, brand awareness/associations and perceived quality. Measures such as price premium, customer satisfaction, loyalty, perceived quality and value are included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>The effect of brand</td>
<td>Vranesevic,</td>
<td>British Food</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Equity</strong></td>
<td>equity on perceived quality of food products.</td>
<td>T., &amp; Stancuc R. (2003).</td>
<td>Journal 106(11), 811–825.</td>
<td>This paper emphasizes the role of the brand as a sign or quality. Consumers evaluate a product not only according to its features but also to the brand.</td>
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**2.3. Research Question and Hypotheses**

The question guiding the research is: How effective is the marketing strategy based on Italian Sounding?

After reviewing some contributions in literature that are relevant to the topic, the following hypotheses have been formulated to steer the analysis:

**H1**: Consumers’ affinity to Italy is positively related to consumers’ willingness to buy Italian food products.

Hypothesis 1 assumes that consumers who experience positive feelings towards Italy are willing to buy Italian food products. This hypothesis has been adapted from the hypothesis H₂ made by Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011). Specifying Italy as the country of interest derives from the results of their research: they found that when participants are asked to name a country towards which they felt affinity, Italy was the most frequently mentioned one.
When further investigating the effect of consumer affinity of buying decisions the authors discovered that affinity is positively related to the willingness to purchase goods from that country. These evidences gave rise to H1; hence, the reasons motivating consumers to buy Italian goods may be various, for instance, because consumers once tasted Italian cuisine, enjoyed it and try to reproduce the same pleasure feelings by acquiring Italian food. These assumptions, along with other similar aspects, will be investigated.

H2: The willingness to buy Italian food products is positively related to consumers’ perception of Italian brands – and Italian food – as of high quality.

The 2nd hypothesis presumes that consumers who buy Italian food do so because they associate it to high quality. This hypothesis presumes that quality is inferred from the brand and that consumers perceive Italian brands to be more qualitative. The way the brand influences consumers’ evaluation of food had already been studied by Vranesevic and Stancec (2003), who found that branded products are preferred over non-branded ones. This holds true even if consumers would in principle consider the physical characteristics (e.g. taste) of the non-branded product to be better than those of the branded good. Building upon their hypothesis that “consumers […] perceive the brand as a “sign of quality”” (p. 814), H2 assumes that consumers take Italian brand names as an indicator of high quality.

H3: The perception of Italian brands and food as of high quality is positively related to consumers’ willingness to pay a premium price for Italian food products.

This hypothesis assumes that the perception of Italian food as highly qualitative would motivate consumers to pay a higher price for it – in comparison with a substitute product that is not Italian. Hypothesis 3 is meant to assess brand equity related to Italian food products; and it will be tested by following the methods suggested by Aaker (1996). When talking about price premium, the author proposes two alternatives to measure it: either through the so-called ‘dollar metric’, or through a ‘trade off’ analysis. On the one hand, consumers have to report the difference in their willingness to pay for one brand with respect to another; on the other hand, customers are repeatedly asked to choose between different goods at different prices. Therefore, questions aimed at assessing brand equity in terms of price premium will be included in the questionnaire, too. This should help assessing if consumers are motivated to buy Italian foodstuff because they attribute a higher value to it. Price premium is
considered to “be the best single measure of brand equity” (Aaker, 1996, p. 107), which is why it has been included in the analysis.

H4: Consumers’ inability to distinguish authentic from Italian sounding food products is positively related with consumers’ willingness to buy Italian sounding food products.

H4a: Consumers’ inability to distinguish authentic from Italian sounding food products is positively related with consumers’ perception of Italian sounding brands – and products – as of high quality.

H4b: Consumers’ inability to distinguish authentic from Italian sounding food products is positively related with consumers’ willingness to pay a premium price for Italian sounding products.

Finally, hypothesis 4 – together with the set of sub-hypotheses - states that when consumers believe that an Italian sounding good is authentic, they are willing to buy it because they perceive it as being of high quality and they would also be ready to pay a premium price for it. This set of hypotheses is based upon the same theoretical construct exposed above. As a matter of fact, if consumers are not able to distinguish between an authentic product and a mere imitation, they will consider the latter as being Italian; hence, it can be expected that their perception of and willingness to pay for that good will be the same as if the product was authentic. If the last set of hypotheses is confirmed, it means that Italian Sounding is effective as a marketing strategy.

2.4. Methodology

2.4.1. Research design.

The hypotheses will be empirically tested by means of a questionnaire, aimed at surveying consumers’ responses to Italian sounding marketing strategies. Particularly, the purpose is to understand the extent to which consumers are able to distinguish authentic from ‘fake’ Italian products. In order to do so, the value attributed to Italian food products will be measured in terms of brand equity. Therefore, closed as well as open-ended questions will be asked in order to obtain both, quantitative and qualitative data.
Some questions will be adapted from Censis’ (2003) report on the consumption of Italian food. In addition to that, the survey will be partly constructed on the basis of the questions proposed by Aaker (1996) to measure brand equity. The sample will include respondents in Germany, France and the US. The reasoning underlying the choice of these 4 countries follows. Particularly, Germany has been selected for two major reasons: first, Germans appear to have always been particularly appreciative of Italian cuisine (Möhring, 2008). Italian restaurants boomed between 1961 – 1990 (Thoms, 2011), which makes German consumers more acquainted with Italian food. Second, this thesis will be written in Germany, hence, I will be able to distribute the questionnaire personally to consumers who are shopping. France was chosen because of missing literature with respect to the topic. During the preliminary research no references to Italian food in France have been found, as such it appears that the role of Italian cuisine in this country has not been analyzed yet. However, the article by O’Neill (1994) shows some evidence as well as the implications of the “Italianization of French Cuisine”. Consequently, investigating the perception of French citizens with respect to the food products of the peninsula could be interesting as this field is still unexplored. The United States have been chosen because Italian Sounding is of particular relevance in the North American market – that is, taking also Canada into account. Only one good out of six is authentic (Magagnoli, 2013). Moreover, Italian restaurants are popular in the U.S. and American consumers are appreciative of Italian cuisine, yet, they do not seem to care much about the authenticity of Italian food products (Cembalo, Cicia, Del Gludice, Scarpa, & Tagliafierro, 2008).

2.4.2. The questionnaire.

The questionnaire will be designed with the software Sphinx and will be composed of 5 sections. The first section should help assessing respondents’ affinity to Italy, for instance, by asking questions related to previous travel experiences in Italy. Section two will consist of questions regarding participants’ familiarity with Italian cuisine. In the third section interviewees will indicate whether, why, and how often they purchase and consume Italian food products. In section four pictures of authentic versus Italian Sounding products will be displayed and respondents will be asked to answer questions and comment on them. The last section will collect information about the respondents’ profile.
The questionnaire will be distributed through social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. In addition to that, printed copies will be handed out to German consumers in supermarkets. To gather responses from the U.S: the crowd sourcing platform Amazon mechanical turk will be used.
## 3. Work Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01.09.2015 – 22.09.2015</td>
<td>Exposé</td>
<td>Thesis topic selection, literature review, research question, exposé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.09.2015 – 18.10.2015</td>
<td>Desk Research</td>
<td>In-depth review of literature and Italian sounding product selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.10.2015 – 08.11.2015</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Design of research questionnaire and pretest</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.11.2015 – 29.11.2015</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Distribution of the questionnaire</td>
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<tr>
<td>23.11.2015 – 06.12.2015</td>
<td>Field Research</td>
<td>Data collection and description</td>
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<td>07.11.2015 – 13.12.2015</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Analysis of results</td>
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<tr>
<td>06.01.2015 – 24.01.2016</td>
<td>Finalization</td>
<td>Review, corrections, preparation of final presentation and defense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Bibliography


