



# Cultural channels in the regional imports of differentiated products: the case of *Made in Italy*

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## Abstract

While the literature typically examines cultural factors influencing international trade at the national level, their effects vary significantly across territories within countries. This study addresses this often-overlooked territorial heterogeneity, focusing on regional imports of differentiated products enjoying country-of-origin effects rooted in cultural origins and driven by specific cultural channels. Empirically, it investigates the role of Italian migrants and universities offering courses in Italian culture and language in attracting regional imports of *Made in Italy* products, such as Italian food and fashion, emblematic of these place-based cultural qualities. Drawing on data from an original database covering 147 importing regions outside Italy, findings reveal a positive association between the presence of Italian migrant communities and universities offering education in Italian culture and language and the regional imports of *Made in Italy* goods.

**Keywords** Differentiated products · Regional international trade · Made in Italy · Italian culture · Italian food and fashion

**JEL Classification** F14 · F22 · R11 · Z13

## 1 Introduction

The extensive study on the reasons for the competitive advantage enjoyed by classes of goods of a country in international markets has long-standing premises. Contemporary studies concern various branches, such as industrial organisation, regional devel-

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opment, and international trade and marketing. In the last four decades, models and analyses have expanded, driven by the growth of international trade and investments and by the perception of an augmented differentiation of the sources of competitive advantage, increasingly based on immaterial factors. The present paper seeks to integrate into this broad stream of research. It contributes to the more delimited field that points out, among immaterial factors, those with a clear cultural connotation.

Among different cultural factors, cultural proximity has been identified as a facilitator of international trade in cultural goods *stricto sensu* (Disdier et al., 2010), including arts, material or digital audiovisuals, and books (Hanson & Xiang, 2011), thereby stimulating both their import and domestic consumption (Takara & Takagi, 2022). Moreover, cultural proximity plays a significant role in the international trade of goods beyond the strict cultural domain. Shared languages and cultures between exporters and importers facilitate commercial exchanges across various product and service categories in international markets (Melitz & Toubal, 2014). Common language enhances communication and fosters trust between transacting parties, reducing transaction costs through an “information” effect (Melitz, 2008). Furthermore, familiarity with the language and culture of producers can increase consumer willingness to purchase and pay premium prices for differentiated goods, known as the “preference” effect (Gould, 1994; Rapoport, 2018).

These effects might be particularly salient in the case of products characterised by intense cultural ties to specific places of origin (Felbermayr & Toubal, 2010). The nexus between culture, identity, and geographical origins is well-established in the economic literature, and it is especially pertinent in the context of international trade, often referred to as the country-of-origin or place-of-origin effect (Abraham & Pato, 2014). The cultural attributes of those products augment their value when consumers can interpret and appreciate them in their cultural context.

This paper adopts a regional perspective to explore the role of cultural channels in the trade of differentiated products that benefit from country-of-origin effects, often rooted in cultural heritage. While most studies on international trade adopt a national perspective, there is limited research addressing trade at sub-national levels despite the recognised heterogeneity within countries (Rodríguez-Pose, 2012). This paper focuses on regional importing contexts and sheds light on two cultural channels connecting regions abroad with exporting countries’ culture and heritage: migrant communities and universities specialising in foreign cultures and languages. These channels operate at delimited territorial scales, embedding “cultural representatives” and “outposts” of the exporting country into local or regional structures of life and work (Zukin, 2008; Barni & Vedovelli, 2012). In this sense, migrants actively participate in local community life, introducing cultural and linguistic elements that shape regional preferences, while universities act as cultural intermediaries, promoting knowledge and appreciation of foreign cultures through academic and public engagement activities (Donati et al., 2022; Bouvet et al., 2017).

We investigate the case of *Made in Italy* products, which exemplify a broad category of internationally traded goods with significant differentiation related to cultural attributes. Traditionally, the literature on *Made in Italy* focuses on products in the sectors of food, fashion, furniture, and instrumental machinery—a group of goods specifically associated with Italy’s artisanal craftsmanship, refined design, and

sensory appeal, all of which underpin the country's distinguished global reputation (Becattini, 1998; Fortis & Carminati, 2009). Italy's extensive presence across regions abroad, stemming from historical migration patterns and the proliferation of educational institutions focused on Italian culture and language, makes it an ideal case study. Indeed, the Italian migrant communities and universities, with their cultivation of the Italian language and culture, serve as channels to enhance the appeal of Italian goods (and related Italian culture) in foreign regions.

The extension of the analysis to the regional level of imports and the focus on cultural channels aim to enrich the stream of studies on cultural-related factors of competitive advantage and trade on international markets and provide insights for policymakers and businesses to craft strategies that leverage place-based cultural assets. This analysis required the setup of an original dataset based on secondary sources. We collected information on 147 regions and measured the presence of Italian migration and educational institutions providing courses on Italian culture and language in these regions. We then related these variables to imports from Italy into these regions, identifying the specific import of Made in Italy products.

In what follows, Sect. 2 reviews the existing literature on international trade from a regional perspective. Section 3 examines how differentiated goods benefit from country-of-origin effects through cultural channels, focusing on the role of migrant communities and advanced education in the language and culture of the exporting countries within the importing region. Section 4 outlines the case of *Made in Italy* goods and the hypotheses for the empirical application. Section 5 describes the dataset, the econometric models to test the hypotheses, and the variables used. Section 6 presents the empirical results and discusses them, while Sect. 7 concludes by suggesting theoretical, business and policy implications, along with reflections on the study's limitations.

## 2 A premise on studies of international trade at the regional level

The literature on international trade typically adopts a national perspective, yet many countries exhibit significant heterogeneity at sub-national levels, potentially influencing trade flows (Rodríguez-Pose, 2012). Despite this, there is a paucity of analyses focusing on trade flows at the regional level, partly due to data acquisition challenges (Lahr et al., 2020). Most studies investigating trade below the national level concentrate on federal states, such as the United States (Head & Mayer, 2002; Cassey, 2014), Mexico (Escobar Gamboa, 2010), and Brazil (Daumal & Zignano, 2010; Bottasso et al., 2018). Some research has examined trade between regions situated on the border between different countries, revealing that borders can reduce trade (Olayele, 2019). Other studies have compared intra-national trade among regions within the same country with foreign exports. Gil-Pareja et al. (2005) observed that Spanish regions trade more extensively within Spain than with foreign countries (Ghemawat et al., 2010). Llano-Verduras et al. (2011) demonstrated that intra-national trade flows tend to be highly localised, with trade value decreasing as distance increases.

A subset of studies has explored the reasons for heterogeneity in trade flows between regions. Gil et al. (2008) investigated the impact of regional trade agencies

abroad on Spanish regional trade, finding that such agencies enhance trade more significantly than embassies and consulates. Márquez-Ramos (2016a) analysed exports from 19 Spanish regions to 45 countries, confirming the importance of port facilities for international trade in the host and neighbouring regions. Márquez-Ramos (2016b) assessed the effect of trade agreements on trade flows from regions in Argentina, Brazil, Poland, and Spain to a sample of importing countries, identifying varying effects for different agreements. Focusing on Poland, Brodzicki and Uminski (2018) demonstrated that metropolitan areas and historical links with foreign countries explain some heterogeneity in regional trade. Brodzicki et al. (2020) and Barbero et al. (2021) found that regional path dependence, regional institutions' quality, and regions' core-peripheral status significantly influence trade flows.

Therefore, sub-national levels may encompass a variety of factors influencing trade. However, direct analyses of regional heterogeneity in cultural-related factors concerning differentiated products are under-investigated in the literature. We work on this gap by proposing an analysis where some of the general factors discussed above regarding international trade at the regional level will play as control variables. Empirically, in our contribution, we explore heterogeneities in importing regions, with the exporting place being a country (Italy).

### 3 Differentiated products, country-of-origin effects, and cultural channels in importing regions

Analyses of international trade in cultural and creative goods highlight the significance of inter-country cultural proximity. Various metrics, such as language similarity, are used to measure the extent of “closer ties” or “easier access” to the cultural codes of the exporting country by the population or specific subsets of consumers in the importing country (Schulze, 1999). Similar relationships with culture also recur in other economically significant categories of non-unique but differentiated products. These products can show linkages to their places of origin and cultural heritage, with trade associated with cultural proximity and related channels.

Local trademarks and geographical indications, state-sponsored campaigns on national “made-in”, and branding strategies by single companies that combine corporate and place-based cultural heritages (Urde et al., 2007; Glover & Higgings, 2023, p. 3) try to convey to national and foreign consumers the association between a class of products and their place of origin. Let us refer to the country-of-origin effect. When successful, it supports competitive advantage for a country's exports or some sub-sets in foreign markets (higher prices and/or higher sales and/or lower costs). Its source could be an information effect, which helps match trading partners who live in foreign countries and, for some reason, share a common pool of cultural codes and linguistic competencies with the importing country, thus reducing transaction costs due to communication difficulties.

However, if differentiated qualities are associated with different territories, branding a “geographical association” (Pike, 2013) combines an information effect with a preference effect for special features linked to the territorial origin. According to the literature on geographical branding, the systematic source of the preference for a spe-

cific territorial origin is the different heritage accumulated in different places where groups of producers contribute to persistent specialisations and progressively adopt product differentiation strategies (Pike, 2013; Abraham & Patro, 2014).

A prime example is food, which is integral to the cultural heritage distinguishing various places and communities in many countries, sometimes identified by specific trademarks of territorial origin (Crescenzi et al., 2021). Similar features may be observed in other products, such as fashion goods and various items related to personal or household use, particularly when they combine with territorial services rich in cultural or creative content (Bellandi & Santini, 2017).

Positive combinations of information and preference imply that some groups of users in foreign markets possess, for various reasons and through various means, knowledge of the country's productive heritage, appreciate its related symbolic content and value its enhanced attributes (Bertoli, 2013; Crescenzi et al., 2021). Indeed, this knowledge may exhibit a heterogeneous geographical distribution across countries and regions abroad. We maintain that this distribution varies depending on the presence of specific cultural channels associated with the product's geographical origin, that is, relational fields that favour shared narratives, cultural symbols, values, and, therefore, cultural proximity.

Such channels operate more directly at delimited territorial scales of the importing markets, particularly regional or local scales, where "cultural representatives" and "outposts" of the country of origin may embed, thanks to enduring structures of life and work (Zukin, 2008; Barni & Vedovelli, 2012). Various channels exist to connect foreign markets with the culture of another country and its places, including establishing specialised high-culture institutions, research and education networks, performing arts tours, media networks, migrant communities, tourism flows, business networks, and foreign trade agencies.

Among these cultural channels, some may have foundations that are not strictly reliant on developing trade flows; therefore, there is possible support for more durable trade positions. The following two sub-sections elaborate on two channels that, in some cases, may show foundational features.

### 3.1 Migrants' communities

Migrant entrepreneurship and international networks of migrant entrepreneurs influence the relationship between migrants and international trade. They promote firms in host and native locations (Rauch & Trindade, 2002) and favour information effects (Parsons & Vézina, 2018). Bratti et al. (2014) observed that the presence of immigrants, particularly entrepreneurial immigrants, in Italy leads to increased export flows from Italian NUTS-3 regions (provinces) to their countries of origin. D'Ambrosio and Montesor (2022) find for Spain's NUTS-3 regions an association of their exports to foreign countries with emigration flows in the same countries.

In addition, these effects combine with cultural factors and preference effects, especially in the case of differentiated product trade. Cultural proximity is evident in regions that host substantial migrant communities (Moya, 2005). Migrants actively participate in local community life, often through migrant associations organising cultural events, and serve as cultural ambassadors for their places of origin (Rauch

& Trindade, 2002). Their integration into the host community involves the introduction of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which can influence the host region (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2006).

This phenomenon exhibits regional specificity due to the localised nature of migrant activity and associations within the settlement community and related knowledge spillovers (Koch et al., 2024). Furthermore, subsequent waves of migration tend to concentrate on areas with established migrant communities (Djajić, 2003). Migrants often become significant consumers of products from their home countries, perceiving them as higher quality or offering more familiar taste or style than similar products from elsewhere (Gould, 1994; Rapoport, 2018). Products with distinct regional and cultural characteristics serve as a link to the migrants' place of origin, a connection they often seek to maintain across generations (Petraglia & Vecchione, 2020). For instance, research on French regions reveals that the importation of differentiated goods, not classified as commodities, increases with the presence of associated migrant communities (Briant et al., 2014).

### 3.2 Universities

Universities can facilitate the dissemination of knowledge about foreign cultures. They exhibit heterogeneous regional distributions. Of course, other educational institutions may contribute to such a function. However, institutions that do not have formalised curricula or that concern lower levels of public instruction can be more easily promoted by the presence of other factors, for example, the same migrants' communities, and more easily influenced by strong trade flows.

University departments specialising in modern languages and foreign cultural studies are significant channels for fostering contact with foreign cultures (Lien & Lo, 2017; Rubino & Beconi, 2018). Two primary avenues of this channel are worth noting.

Firstly, academics often organise community engagement activities, such as cultural festivals or public lectures, drawing on cultural research they conduct (Rubino & Beconi, 2018). These initiatives reflect broader socio-cultural and economic engagement strategies that universities adopt to directly support local communities' development and well-being (Benneworth et al., 2017; Kitagawa et al., 2022).

Secondly, consider the role of educational courses dedicated to specific cultures, encompassing their values, history, language, and characteristic products (Bouvet et al., 2017). Students enrolled in these courses may play as ambassadors in their local communities, expressing a keen interest in learning about the culture in question. Moreover, such students can afford the opportunity (sometimes a graduation requirement) to spend a period in countries where the language and culture they study are prevalent. This immersion experience, whether a short summer school or an entire semester abroad, aims not only at enhancing language proficiency but also at providing direct exposure to the culture of study<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, students gain

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the US, the Italian Studies Department of Columbia University offers a summer school in Venice (see: <https://italian.columbia.edu/content/summer-program-venice-0>) for students studying Italian, while the Department of French and Italian of the University of Pittsburgh offers the possibility

firsthand insight into local products and better grasp their intrinsic value. They serve as conduits for disseminating knowledge about goods originating from the culture they study, particularly those carrying strong cultural symbolism and qualities tied to their place of origin. These effects increase further when students participate in internship programs with firms associated with the culture in question (Rubino & Beconi, 2018).

Even when a clear connection exists between the establishment of a course or department focusing on a foreign language and culture and the historical presence of a migrant community representing that language and culture in the region, the sustainability and perpetuation of the course, as well as the department's capacity to propagate the foreign culture over time, are significantly influenced by the institutional strategies and profiles of the parent universities (Hajek et al., 2020; Donati et al., 2022).

The multifaceted literature and associated concepts outlined above suggest a potential correlation between regional imports of differentiated products and the presence of "cultural representatives" or "outposts" of the country of origin. Subsequent sections will precisely outline a model of empirical analysis and test such an association, focusing on the case of *Made in Italy*.

#### 4 *Made in Italy* and Italian cultural channels in foreign regions

We examine the case of *Made in Italy* products to investigate the association between cultural channels in importing regions and the international trade of differentiated products carrying country-of-origin effects.

A recent study by Maghssudipour et al. (2023) conducted a national-level investigation to examine the connections of the diffusion of Italian culture and language to the international trade of Italian products. The study tested whether factors of cultural proximity, such as the presence of Italian migrants and students of Italian language, are positively associated with Italian exports, finding some positive associations. The paper did not explore the possibility that these associations reflected place-based effects at the local and regional levels more than at the national level. The present paper aims to go deeper into that possibility, taking again the case of Italian trade.

Italy presents two relevant features for a study of cultural channels of differentiated products in foreign regions: a distinct image associated with places and culture that has garnered significant international recognition and a widespread and historically deep dissemination of outposts representing the Italian culture.

Many Italian products have emerged as internationally acclaimed goods since the latter decades of the twentieth century, embodying and conveying Italian culture and language, along with their images, suggestions, and symbols, which constitute integral components of their value (Becattini, 1998; Fortis & Carminati, 2009; Turchetta, 2005; Barni & Vedovelli, 2012; Bertoli, 2013; Bettiol, 2015). The production of such goods typically originates in places with distinct historical, institutional, social, and

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to spend even a whole year in France or Italy for its language students (see: <https://www.frenchanditalian.pitt.edu/abroad/french> for French and <https://www.frenchanditalian.pitt.edu/abroad/italian> for Italian).

business heritages, reflecting local identities and fostering systemic innovation and industrial creativity, as highlighted in the literature on industrial districts and local productive systems (e.g., Becattini & Rullani, 2004; Bellandi & Santini, 2017).

Cultural-related effects are particularly evident in sectors where Italian trade enjoys robust international positions, including food (and wine), fashion (such as textiles, clothing, leather, and shoes), and household goods (Fortis & Carminati, 2009; Bellandi et al., 2020). Italian food's success is closely tied to gastronomy and its various manifestations, such as recipes, dishes, and dining venues like restaurants offering authentic cuisine, which reflect a rich interplay of local identity, traditions, territories, histories, landscapes, creativity, research, and technological innovation (Santagata, 2002; Friel & Sacco, 2015). Moreover, many high-quality Italian food products enjoy the benefits of geographical indications. While the preparation of typical Italian food is celebrated domestically and experienced by tourists, it is also accessible abroad, especially through the widespread presence of Italian restaurants worldwide (Waldfoegel, 2020).

Similarly, Italian fashion embodies cultural sensitivity, drawing upon symbolic values, design, and reputation, where entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and craftsmanship converge and are closely associated with specific places (Butticè et al., 2023). Fashion capital cities leverage their ties to the fashion industry as part of their branding strategy (Casadei & Lee, 2020). Although certain Italian fashion brands outsource manufacturing abroad, components with higher value are typically produced in Italy<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, the Italian furniture industry relies heavily on design and craftsmanship, primarily concentrated in Italian industrial districts. Additionally, products made or designed in Italy hold cultural significance across various sectors, including luxury and sports automotive, bicycles, yachts, and specialised machinery used in food, fashion, and furniture production (Becattini, 1998).

Italy boasts a tradition of cultural channels at the international level that pre-dates the industrialisation wave of the second half of the twentieth century and the related expansion of *Made in Italy* trade. These channels include Italian communities established abroad and the Italian language as a vehicle for cultural and academic studies in humanities, rooted in historical legacies such as the Roman Empire and the Renaissance (Barni & Vedovelli, 2012).

Italian migrant communities, for instance, have played a significant role in the international transmission of Italian culture through waves of migration between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (Alfano et al., 2022), including the spread of material culture tied to Italian food and other types of goods (Turchetta, 2005).

The review of the theoretical and empirical literature presented above suggests a conceptual frame that we summarise with the help of two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1a** Italian migration in the importing region is positively associated with the import of *Made in Italy* products.

<sup>2</sup> The strategies followed by various fashion brands are very different. Some have focused extensively on delocalisation, such as Gucci (see Tokatli, 2013), while others have maintained manufacturing entirely or almost entirely in Italy (e.g., Brunello Cucinelli).

**Hypothesis 1b** The role played by Italian migration is more significant for the regional import of *Made in Italy* products than for other imports from Italy.

Additionally, the widespread presence of Italian culture and language studies abroad, with over two million individuals studying Italian worldwide in 2018 (MAECI, 2019), has further contributed to this cultural diffusion. Many universities in various countries offer Italian studies and courses on Italian culture and language, acting as conduits for disseminating Italian culture (Campa, 2019). Thus, we suggest two more hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2a** Education in Italian culture and language in the importing region is positively associated with importing *Made in Italy* products.

**Hypothesis 2b** The role played by education in Italian culture and language is more significant for the regional import of *Made in Italy* products than for other imports from Italy.

The potential interactions between the two cultural channels warrant further analysis. On the one hand, existing literature suggests that migration and education in a specific culture do not inherently operate through the same mechanisms. Migration connects local communities to a specific culture through interpersonal relationships, cultural practices, and direct experiences (Hajro et al., 2021). Education in a specific culture offers formal knowledge and structured exposure (Fieles-Ahmad & Huber, 2022). On the other hand, we can expect that migration and education in a specific culture and language may not have an independent impact. Thus, their simultaneous presence might saturate the attention of the consumer pool, leading to diminishing returns or even competition for influence. In the case under study, this substitution effect may arise from the foundation of interest in Italian culture and tradition that both channels target (Vedovelli, 2023).

Furthermore, *Made in Italy* products are often considered niche goods with a distinct cultural identity, appealing to a relatively fixed type of consumer abroad. Consumers of these products may possess an affinity for Italian goods due to their connection to Italian culture, whether through migration, education, or both. Thus, migration and education channels might appeal to overlapping audiences, reducing their combined effectiveness in stimulating new demand. Thus, we provide one last hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3** The interaction between Italian migration and education in Italian culture and language is negatively associated with the regional import of *Made in Italy* products.

Therefore, the Italian case provides an ideal context for examining the empirical significance of cultural channels in regions importing differentiated products enjoying country-of-origin effects. In principle, these channels owe their existence to historical roots that pre-date the widespread success of *Made in Italy* products. However, it will

be important to acknowledge the potential for feedback mechanisms within contemporary flows of products, services, and individuals.

## 5 Database, methodology and variables

Subsequent sections will offer details regarding our original dataset on regional imports of Italian goods, the econometric models, and the variables derivable from the dataset.

### 5.1 An original database

We gathered data on regional imports from Italy in 2019<sup>3</sup>, encompassing both the total value and that specific to prominent sectors of *Made in Italy*, i.e. food and fashion<sup>4</sup>. This data was sourced from the national statistical offices of 10 out of the top 15 countries in terms of imports of these typical sectors<sup>5</sup>. To ensure granularity, we sought data at the finest territorial level feasible. For Australia, the data pertained to its eight “states and territories”, while for Austria, France<sup>6</sup>, Portugal, and Spain, it was at the NUTS-2 level (European basic regions). Belgium, Germany<sup>7</sup>, and the UK (prior to Brexit) provided data at the NUTS-1 level (European major socio-economic regions), whereas Canada provided data at the level of its 10 provinces (Canadian major political units). Data from the USA covered the 50 states and Washington D.C.<sup>8</sup>. The dataset encompasses 147 regions, each defined differently based on the respective classification systems.

Additionally, we collected data on Italian migrants (stocks) across the same 147 regions from national statistical offices. These data included information on Italian migrants, primarily in 2018 or 2017, depending on their availability.

Information on universities concerned the same 147 regions and the presence of Italian Studies Departments and lecturers providing Italian courses. We used various sources, with the number of Italian Studies departments extracted from universities’

<sup>3</sup> In 2019, the last year before the breakout of the pandemic, Italian international exports were in a state of steady growth, to which almost all typical Italian sectors contributed (ICE, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> We referred to the Harmonized System code as the global product classification system. The codes involving typical Italian products were 01–24, 33, 34, 37, 41, 43, 44, 49, 50 to 67, 69 to 71, 82, 89, 91, 96, 2530, 7321, 8432 to 8438, 8444 to 8453, 8456 to 8467, 8471 and 9014. See the Appendix, Table A.1, for a more detailed explanation of the included codes.

<sup>5</sup> See the Appendix, Table A.2 for data about imports from the 10 countries considered in the analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Due to data availability, we grouped seventeen French NUTS-2 level regions into eight regions. French overseas departments were not included. Overall, we had information on thirteen French regions.

<sup>7</sup> Data on the Sachsen-Anhalt region were not available.

<sup>8</sup> Reference sources for trade data included Australian Bureau of Statistics for Australian territories, Bundesanstalt Statistik Österreich - Statistics Austria for Austrian regions, Belgian Foreign Trade Agency for Belgian regions, Statistique Canada– Statistics Canada for Canadian regions, data.gouv.fr for French regions, Destatis Statistisches Bundesamt– Office of National Statistics for German regions, Instituto Nacional de Estadística– Statistics Portugal for Portuguese regions, Estadísticas del comercio exterior español– Statistics of Foreign Trade for Spanish regions, Office for National Statistics for UK regions and United States Census Bureau for USA states.

websites and specialised catalogues of Romance studies. We considered departments not only in large research-intensive universities typically located in major cities but also those in smaller vocational colleges dispersed across regions. We retrieved the count of lecturers providing Italian courses in foreign universities from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding control variables, we obtained data on regional GDP per capita (at the current market price in 2019) and regions and territories hosting capital cities from the official statistical offices of the relevant countries.

## 5.2 Econometric model

We utilise regional trade data to ascertain the association between the factors driving trade in importing regions, specifically related to the two identified cultural channels, and the regional import value of *Made in Italy* products. Consistently with prior studies on regional trade dynamics, we adopt a unilateral exchange specification approach (Nicolini, 2003). Our analysis defines the exporter entity as a country (Italy). At the same time, the importing regions encompass those affiliated with 10 countries, with available data from the top 15 countries exhibiting substantial imports of Italian products (refer to Sect. 5.3 for details).

The main model is the following:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Regional import of Made in Italy}_{ij} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Share Italian migration}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_2 \text{Share education in Italian culture}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_3 c_{ij} + \eta_i + \varepsilon_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

The dependent variable is the *Regional import of Made in Italy*<sub>ij</sub> as the total value of the import of Italian fashion and Italian food of a region *j* (in country *i*) from Italy in 2019. *Share Italian migration*<sub>ij</sub> measures the share of Italian immigrants to the total number of immigrants in the region *j* (in country *i*). In this context, rather than attributing a general tendency of immigrants to stimulate imports of products from abroad, we specifically capture the distinct role of Italian immigration, ensuring that our analysis isolates this effect rather than reflecting a broader impact of immigration in the region. *Share education in Italian culture*<sub>ij</sub> considers the share

<sup>9</sup> Particularly, there were 81 universities with an Italian Studies Department or program and Italian courses across regions in the EU countries under investigation, 55 across Canadian provinces, 29 across regions in the UK, and 65 across different states in the US. Data about Australia were available only for Italian lecturers; six were across different territories. We checked the following public catalogues and websites to extract data on the presence of Italian departments within universities in regions abroad as well as universities providing Italian culture and language education: the website of the Italian Embassy in Ottawa for Canada; the list of American Universities with Italian studies department from Wikipedia and the Modern Language Association (MLA) for the US; the Italian-Germanic association “Deutscher Italianisten Verband (DIV)” for Germany and Austria; the “Complete University Guide 2021– Italian studies” available from The Complete University Guide website for the UK. We also manually checked each university’s website in Belgium and France. In the case of Belgium, we began our research from the list of Belgium Universities retrieved from the “Times Higher Education” website and, in the case of France, from the list of French Universities retrieved from the website of the French Ministry for Higher Education, Research, and Innovation. We extracted the number of Italian lecturers abroad from the website of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

of universities offering Italian culture and language courses to the total number of universities in a region  $j$  (in country  $i$ ). In this way, we capture the role played by the regional diffusion of knowledge about Italian culture at the university level. We also avoid catching a general effect due to the presence of universities. Finally,  $c_{ij}$  represents a set of control variables typically related to international trade,  $\eta_i$  is the vector of country dummies, where  $i$  indexes the countries, and  $\epsilon_{ij}$  is the error term. For a detailed discussion of the construction of the variables, please refer to the next section.

In an alternative specification of the model, we alter the dependent variable to represent the ratio of regional imports of Italian food and Italian fashion to regional imports of other products from Italy<sup>10</sup>. This dependent variable is a fraction of the sum of regional food and fashion imports from Italy in the numerator and the sum of all regional imports from other sectors in the denominator. This adjustment allows us to directly assess whether our variables of interest exhibit a stronger or weaker association with the import of core sectors of *Made in Italy*, such as Italian food and fashion, compared to the import of other Italian products. This specification directly tests the hypotheses stated in H1b and H2b, and the results will be interpreted accordingly. Controlling for total imports is also relevant to this specification, as the denominator of our dependent variable is not total imports but only the share of imports from Italy that are not *in the core that we denominate as Made in Italy*. Total imports still play a relevant role in capturing aggregate effects.

For our cross-sectional estimation<sup>11</sup> We follow the methodology Santos Silva and Tenreiro (2011) outlined and employ Poisson Pseudo Maximum Linear (PPML) regressions. This method is advantageous in our context as it can be applied to any dependent variable with non-negative values without requiring explicit distribution specification (Correia et al., 2020). Furthermore, PPML regressions utilise robust standard errors to address concerns related to heteroskedasticity, a common issue encountered with traditional OLS estimators that can lead to inconsistent estimates. Unlike alternative approaches like the log-linear model, PPML regressions offer a natural mechanism for handling zero values in the dependent variable. Various analyses of trade data used this approach, both at the regional level (Márquez-Ramos, 2016a; Brodzicki & Uminski, 2018; Olayele, 2019; Brodzicki et al., 2020; Barbero et al., 2021) and from the perspective of a single exporter (Johnston et al., 2015). Country dummies are present in all specifications.

### 5.3 Variables

All variables are defined and measured at the regional level. The dependent variable consists of the values of imports of *Made in Italy* goods, the Italian food ratio, and

<sup>10</sup> The value of furniture, traditionally included in typical *Made in Italy* sectors, is easily distinguishable from the rest only in a few country's statistics, so we cannot consider it in the subgroups.

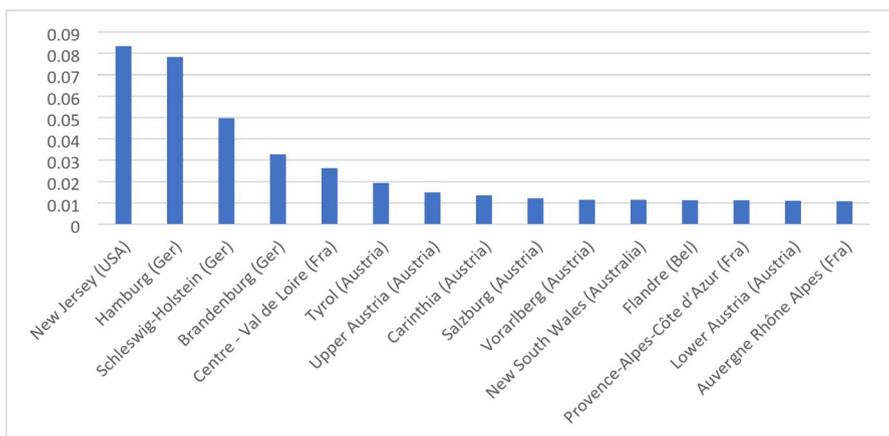
<sup>11</sup> The cross-sectional research design aims to detect associations between dependent and independent variables. In the case under study, it is worth recalling again that Italians largely started migrating across territories included in the analysis, mainly between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Universities providing courses about the Italian language and culture were established across the globe independently from the trade of *Made in Italy* goods.

the Italian fashion ratio, as per the specification, across the regions under examination in 2019. Figure 1 illustrates the top 15 regions regarding total imports of such products. We computed the import-to-GDP ratio (depicted on the Y-axis) for descriptive analysis. The visualisation reveals a widely dispersed geographical distribution of the most significant importers globally, with the United States, Australia, and various European territories prominently among the top 15.

Figures A1–A2 in the Appendix show the first 15 regions for import of Italian food and fashion, respectively.

The dependent variable about imports of *Made in Italy* goods was included in the model without any transformation, as requested by the PPML estimation technique applied to trade data, except for the fact that they were divided by 1,000,000. Concerning imports of Italian food and fashion, they are measures computed as regional imports of Italian food and import of Italian fashion to regional imports from other Italian sectors.

Regarding independent variables, *Share Italian Migration* is the share of Italian immigrants to the total number of immigrants in a region. The variable *Share Education in Italian Culture* is the share of universities offering courses on Italian culture and language to the total number of universities in a region. In particular, we have data on the Italian language and culture departments and their locations. We also collected data on lecturers teaching the Italian language and culture. A comparison between the two data sources showed that some lecturers offer Italian language and culture courses in universities that do not host Italian language and culture departments. We, therefore, added the information on universities with lecturers who do not belong to such departments to the data on Italian language and culture departments. This sum allows us to have reliable quantitative information on the number of universities with courses diffusing knowledge about the Italian language and culture<sup>12</sup>.



**Fig. 1** Most relevant regions for import intensity of made in Italy. *Note* The y-axis shows the import-to-GDP ratio

<sup>12</sup> We also have information on the activation of individual Italian courses in universities in some regions, which, since they are mostly offered by Italian department studies and lecturers providing courses in Ital-

Finally, we calculated the ratio of this measure to the total number of universities in a region.

Concerning controls, we looked at the GDP per capita (*GDP PC*) as a measure of the standard of living. The variable *Capital City* aims to control the fact that regions hosting capital cities are those in which several organisations representing foreign countries are located (e.g., embassies and national trade agencies). Regions with capital cities are coded with 1; otherwise, with 0. The variable *Remoteness* aims to capture the extent to which regions are far from trade partners, built on the idea that more secluded places could have less developed trade facilities (Navas et al., 2020). This variable, computed for each region, is the distance-weighted sum of the market sizes of all trading partners, where the market size is proxied by the GDP (Manova & Zhang, 2012). Finally, *Total import of Italian products* refers to total imports in each sector from Italy for each region under study. *GDP PC*, *Remoteness* and *Total import of Italian products* are transformed with the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of original values. Coefficients involving transformed variables should be interpreted the same way as those based on a standard logarithmic variable, but they have the advantage of remaining defined for zero values (Bellemare & Wichman, 2020).

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables included in the models, while Table 2 shows the correlations among such variables. The latter does not indicate any relevant levels of correlation among variables.

## 6 Results and discussion

Interpretations of coefficients obtained by PPML estimations are equivalent to those estimated with ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with dependent variables in logs.

Table 3 investigates the roles played by key variables on *Made in Italy* imports, focusing on the role of Italian migration, education in Italian culture and language, and their interaction.

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ian language and culture, have been used as a robustness check.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Made in Italy import	147	456.403	734.252	0.198	4109.737
Share Italian migration	147	0.015	0.023	0	0.136
Share education in Italian culture	147	0.192	0.266	0	1
GDP PC (ihs)	147	11.099	0.715	8.36	14.105
Capital city	147	0.068	0.253	0	1
Remoteness (ihs)	147	46.97	0.338	46.557	48.069
Total import of Italian products (ihs)	147	20.413	1.913	15.53	25.307

*Made in Italy* is divided by 1,000,000. *Share Italian migration* and *Share education in Italian culture* are computed as a share of total migration towards a region and as a share of the number of universities in a region, respectively. *GDP PC*, *Remoteness* and *Total import of Italian products* are transformed with the inverse hyperbolic sine before computation of the descriptive statistics. *Capital city* is a binary variable

**Table 2** Correlation matrix

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Made in Italy import	1.000						
(2) Share Italian migration	0.166*	1.000					
	(0.047)						
(3) Share education in Italian culture	0.242*	0.253*	1.000				
	(0.004)	(0.002)					
(4) GDP PC (ihs)	0.058	-0.081	0.006	1.000			
	(0.492)	(0.338)	(0.946)				
(5) Capital city	0.269*	0.116	0.079	0.238*	1.000		
	(0.001)	(0.168)	(0.347)	(0.004)			
(6) Remoteness (ihs)	0.102	0.182*	0.248*	-0.243*	0.011	1.000	
	(0.223)	(0.030)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.897)		
(7) Total import of Italian products (ihs)	0.328*	0.031	0.260*	0.120	0.065	0.085	1.000
	(0.000)	(0.710)	(0.002)	(0.155)	(0.441)	(0.315)	

See note to Table 1 for variables' transformations. Robust s.e. in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

**Table 3** PPML estimations: analysis on regional import of made in Italy products

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Made in Italy import			
Share Italian migration	8.334***		8.204***	6.305*
	(2.542)		(2.713)	(3.373)
Share education in Italian culture		1.146**	1.192**	0.788**
		(0.456)	(0.503)	(0.392)
Interaction			-6.815	-2.557
			(9.201)	(10.59)
GDP PC (ihs)				-0.0239
				(0.410)
Capital City				0.996**
				(0.443)
Remoteness (ihs)				0.218
				(0.375)
Total import of Italian products (ihs)				0.0000360**
				(0.0000182)
Constant	5.973***	5.842***	5.724***	-4.336
	(0.279)	(0.284)	(0.290)	(20.61)
Observations	147	147	147	147
Country effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

See note to Table 1 for variables' transformations. Robust s.e. in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

Column (1) tests Hypothesis 1a, which examines the relationship between the share of Italian migration and imports of *Made in Italy* products. The results show a positive and highly significant coefficient, indicating that a higher share of Italian migrants is strongly associated with increased regional imports of *Made in Italy*

products. Column (2) tests Hypothesis 2a, which assesses the effect of education in Italian culture and language on regional *Made in Italy* imports. Here, the share of education in Italian culture and language is positive and significant, suggesting that cultural familiarity through education also enhances regional preferences for *Made in Italy* goods. These initial findings are consistent with the results of Maghssudipour et al. (2023), but they extend the analysis by adopting a regional approach and using a different measure for the diffusion of Italian culture at the university level abroad.

Column (3) tests Hypothesis 3, which explores the interaction between Italian migration and education in Italian culture. The interaction term is negative but not statistically significant. This non-significant result suggests that the anticipated moderating effect of education in Italian culture on the relationship between migration and *Made in Italy* imports does not hold in our data. While we hypothesised that these two cultural channels might work in a complementary or substitutive manner, our findings indicate that their interaction is not substantial enough to be statistically significant. This result could be due to a variety of reasons. For example, the influence of migration and education are independent rather than interacting, or the effect of education in Italian culture may be weaker or less immediate in regions with higher migrant populations. Another possibility is that the direct influence of migration networks on trade is stronger and more immediate than the more diffuse influence of cultural education. Future studies could investigate these possibilities using other datasets or qualitative approaches.

Column (4) provides estimates that include control variables such as GDP per capita, capital city presence, remoteness, and total import of Italian products. Estimates confirm the results regarding core variables already acknowledged.

The findings across all specifications reveal positive and statistically significant coefficients of our core variables about regional representatives of Italian culture abroad, indicating a positive association with the regional import of *Made in Italy* products. Thus, Hp1a and Hp2a are validated. Hp3, about the substitutive function of the two cultural channels, is not confirmed statistically, even if the relation sign appears consistent with that hypothesis.

Table 4 reports estimates on the Italian food and Italian fashion imports ratio to imports from other Italian sectors, thereby allowing the exam of the validity of Hp1b and Hp2b.

The core variables all present positive and statistically significant coefficients except for *Education in Italian culture*, where the dependent variable is the import of Italian fashion from other imports from Italy. Thus, they confirm Hp1b and only partially confirm Hp2b because estimates suggest the role played by education in Italian culture is more significant for the import of only one of the typical sectors of the *Made in Italy* under investigation (Italian food). The non-statistically significant result regarding education in Italian culture and language suggests a nuanced scenario, where Italian fashion products may not always hold specific appeal in regions with universities offering specific courses about Italian culture and language. This result suggests that strategies promoting Italian exports should consider the overlap between these cultural mechanisms. The relationship between university courses about Italian culture and language and regional imports of Italian fashion is weaker or more indirect than immigrants' evident influence. Immigrants often bring direct con-

**Table 4** PPML estimations: analysis on regional import of Italian food and Italian fashion relative to other imports from Italy

	(1)	(2)
	Import of Italian food/other import from Italy	Import of Italian fashion/other import from Italy
Share Italian migration	6.632* (3.497)	6.480* (3.824)
Share education in Italian culture	1.045** (0.478)	0.568 (0.434)
Interaction	-3.680 (11.50)	-1.970 (10.54)
GDP PC (ihs)	0.165 (0.447)	-0.129 (0.379)
Capital City	0.317 (0.527)	1.314*** (0.406)
Remoteness (ihs)	0.382 (0.430)	0.128 (0.376)
Total import of Italian products (ihs)	0.0000317* (0.0000171)	0.0000392** (0.0000192)
Constant	-15.14 (23.99)	0.568 (19.81)
Observations	147	147
Country effects	✓	✓

See note to Table 1 for variables' transformations. Robust s.e. in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

nections, networks, and insider knowledge that facilitate trade, while the influence of university courses might be more diffuse or less immediate.

Furthermore, a comparison with estimates in which the dependent variable is the regional import of Italian food suggests that the latter sector has a greater power of symbolic recognition across buyers in regions abroad. This structure is also due to the different price categories that Italian food and Italian fashion can reach. While typical Italian fashion products tend to show very high prices for the average customer, food products have a higher price heterogeneity, including some more affordable items.

The presence of Italian migrants and Italian studies departments and lecturers offering Italian courses not only influences Italian imports directly but also signals the potential for educational institutions and migrants-related organisations to actively promote Italian culture and language through various engagement initiatives accessible to local audiences, such as organising film festivals and open lectures<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, such initiatives often incorporate references to typical *Made in Italy*

<sup>13</sup> For example, the Department of Italian Studies at Brown University in the US frequently organises open events devoted to Italian culture (see: <https://events.brown.edu/italian/event/226748-il-cinema-ritrovato-on-tour-dantes-inferno>). The University of Paris 3 - Sorbonne Nouvelle has an association which specifically aims to promote Italian culture outside the university (see: <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/festival-d-italie-nouvelle-corpi-celesti-le-corps-dans-tous-ses-etats-663958.kjsp?RH=1179926172259>).

products<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, in the specific case of education in Italian culture and Italian food, opportunities for students of Italian to spend time in Italy can enhance their appreciation of the qualities and cultural significance embedded in *Made in Italy* food through firsthand experiences of purchasing products in Italian cities and towns and engaging with Italian lifestyles. In short, this suggests that the cultural channels under investigation do not only operate through the direct consumption of migrants and students/teachers of Italian, but they also play a role in the dissemination of Italian culture in the cities and regions of residence, thus stimulating indirectly the regional import of differentiated goods as *Made in Italy* products.

This approach represents a significant advancement over the analyses presented in Maghssudipour et al. (2023). Our results enable a direct analysis of the role played by traditional *Made in Italy* sectors, such as food and fashion, compared to products from other sectors that, while originating in Italy, do not benefit from the same level of cultural connection and reputation associated with the country.

The question of causality remains to be addressed. Our hypotheses refer to associations. However, the structure of the econometric model and how the results suggest a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The potential reverse causality should also be considered, whereby increased imports of *Made in Italy* products may lead to more migrants from Italy and/or more Italian language and culture courses. With the data at our disposal, we cannot entirely rule out this possibility, whereby it is conceivable that business in typical *Made in Italy* goods may attract traders, who in turn might decide to invest in the promotion of Italian culture and the culture of the *Made in Italy*. Similarly, new migrants could be attracted, and new Italian language and culture courses could be established. However, these reinforcing effects pivot on cultural dynamics that pre-date the widespread international trade of typical Italian goods. Furthermore, the potential operation of this feedback loop also relies on a cultural foundation that is certainly more evident and direct in the case of universities. It manifests as a secondary effect in the case of migration.

We have also included several robustness analyses in the Appendix. Table A3 replaces the original dependent variable with the total regional imports for goods originating from Italy. The results are similar to those previously observed for the specific case of *Made in Italy* products. More precisely, when investigating total imports from Italy, the estimate's magnitude of the relationships between our core variables and the import of *Made in Italy* products is reduced. This reduction suggests that part of the observed effect was due to a general association between regional imports from Italy and the presence of Italian migrants and educational programs. However, total imports do not entirely explain this association. An additional significant relationship remains specifically with the import of *Made in Italy* products, which reinforces our finding that the effects of Italian migrants and cultural familiarity through education are more strongly related to the import of *core Made in Italy* products than to total imports from Italy. The estimates in Table 2 confirmed the distinct role played by

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<sup>14</sup> For example, in the US, the University of Arizona has recently introduced a new course entirely devoted to *Made in Italy* (see: <https://italian.arizona.edu/news/italian-wonderland-project-integrates-language-and-culture>), while in Canada, the University of Victoria is offering a course module called "A taste of Italy, Food as Culture" within the undergraduate program of Italian Language.

goods classified as *Made in Italy* compared to the total value calculated across all sectors. Table A4 provides estimates without interaction terms in the first column and estimates excluding the two core variables in the second column, allowing for a direct comparison of results. Estimates suggest no substantial differences with the results presented in Table 3, providing evidence that our main explanatory variables effectively capture the variation that these controls would explain. Table A5 presents the estimates of the exact specifications as the full model in Table 3 but uses an alternative proxy for the education variable. This proxy concerns the presence of Italian state schools in the regions under study in the first column and Italian private schools in the second column. This alternative measure captures a broader educational dimension of cultural dissemination and is less likely to be directly influenced by university-specific strategies. The results of these additional analyses closely align with those obtained in the original analysis.

Finally, Table A6 reports the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) test results. The results indicate no significant multicollinearity issues in our regression model, corroborating the findings in the correlation table.

## 7 Some concluding remarks

This paper builds upon recent research investigating the roles of language and culture in the international trade of differentiated goods under country-of-origin effects at the national level (Maghssudipour et al., 2023). It extends its analysis to the regional level of importation and acknowledges the regionally differentiated expressions of specific cultural channels.

Based upon a Poisson Pseudo Maximum Linear (PPML) estimation strategy on data from an original database covering 147 importing regions outside Italy, the findings indicate a positive relationship between regional imports of *Made in Italy* goods and Italian cultural outposts in foreign regions. They also suggest that Italian migration is associated with the regional import of Italian food and fashion more than the import of other Italian sectors, and the same applies to the relationship between education in Italian culture and language and the regional import of Italian food.

This work offers several implications. First, from the theoretical point of view, it deepens the exploration of the interplay between culture and place in shaping international trade, particularly for differentiated products enjoying country-of-origin effects. Examining trade dynamics at the regional level unveils the importance of localised cultural expressions and their role in fostering trade relationships. Second, the study enriches the literature on cultural proximity, demonstrating how migrant communities and educational institutions act as cultural intermediaries, embedding cultural heritage into importing regions' social and economic fabric. Finally, it contributes to the broader discussion on how cultural assets translate into competitive advantages for differentiated goods in global markets. This analysis involved a considerable effort during the data collection phase, resulting in a dataset uniquely compiled at the regional level. This granularity represents a novel aspect of the study, enabling region-specific insights.

The findings also offer insights for policymakers. Promoting cultural dissemination abroad through institutions that support cultural education, such as universities, can enhance the international visibility and appeal of differentiated products like *Made in Italy* goods. Policymakers could also support initiatives that strengthen connections between migrant communities and local economies in importing regions, as these communities act as natural ambassadors of cultural and economic ties. Additionally, strategies that integrate cultural promotion with trade policies may help to sustain competitive advantages for culturally significant products in international markets.

Finally, the results underline the importance of leveraging cultural channels in businesses' market entry and expansion strategies. Firms can benefit from partnerships with local cultural institutions and migrant community organisations to increase consumer awareness and appreciation of their products. For example, co-branding campaigns with cultural associations or collaborations with educational programs could amplify brand recognition and consumer loyalty. Furthermore, the distinction between the food and fashion sectors suggests that firms should tailor their strategies to sector-specific dynamics, considering the varying degrees of cultural attachment and accessibility that influence consumer preferences.

Some limitations persist, primarily stemming from data availability constraints. First, reliance on cross-sectional data limits our ability to explicitly discern causality in empirical analysis and dynamic relationships. Access to longitudinal data spanning multiple years would enhance our understanding of these dynamics. Second, the absence of certain control variables, such as the number of emigrants from the partner region residing in Italy or measures of regional trade openness, may introduce unexplained heterogeneity in our analysis. Third, the lack of data on Italian entrepreneurship and foreign direct investments in the regions under study limits our ability to account for their influence directly. Fourth, while our study focused on Italian imports, expanding the analysis to other "Made in" categories would provide valuable insights for comparison (Glover & Higgins, 2023). Finally, we focused on top importing countries that, within their borders, have regions with varying propensities for imports from Italy. This approach allows us to capture a certain level of heterogeneity. However, it is important to note that expanding the database to include additional regions in other countries could provide a valuable direction for future research. Despite these limitations, we suggest that our exploration serves as a foundation for broader and more systematic studies in the future.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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