Hashtags and Heritage: The Use of #italianamerican on Instagram

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Abstract

Using both framing theory and Collier's cultural identity theory, this paper seeks to study the use of #italianamerican on Instagram by first attempting to determine if it is used exclusively by Italian Americans as a way to demonstrate their own cultural identity. The paper will then examine whether the message frame of posts using #italianamerican demonstrates users' personal perceptions of Italian American culture. Finally, the paper will examine if there is a relationship between #italianamerican posters' ethnicity and the message frame of their posts. This paper does not argue that Italian Americans are the only Americans of European ancestry taking part in the hashtag phenomenon; rather, this paper is meant to examine how one ethnic group attempts to define itself by its use of digital and social media. This study provides insight into how ethnicity and cultural view are associated. Results show that message frame and ethnicity are not linked, as anyone can admire and respect a culture and post a positive message about it on social media, even if it is not their culture of origin. Members of a specific ethnic group tend to have a stronger view of their culture of origin, as demonstrated by the posts selected for this study. This study showed that Italian Americans use social media to educate others about their heritage, as well as to celebrate their culture of origin. The methods used in this study could be applied to other European American ethnic groups and their social media usage, including Irish Americans and German Americans, among others.

Keywords: Instagram, Italian American, ethnicity, framing theory, Collier's cultural identity theory, hashtags.

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The hashtag has become such a part of popular culture that it has even been defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a word or phrase preceded by a hash (#) and used to identify messages relating to a specific topic" specifically on social media websites and applications (Myslewski, 2014). Since their arrival on the Internet scene, hashtags have been used in political debates, popular music, and to generate awareness of social causes, among other things. With hashtags being such a part of today's digital culture, it comes as no surprise that just about anything can be defined by one, including one's ethnic heritage and culture.

Ethnic communities aiming to maintain their unity and develop a new communication mode have found in hashtags an opportunity to set boundaries between the "Self" and the "Other," and to define their own identity (Belorussova et al., 2020). When one thinks of "identity," the word alone conjures up many possible definitions depending on the situation. For people of varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds, the concept of identity takes on a whole new meaning, as it can vary from person to person. There have been numerous attempts at defining and redefining ethnic and cultural identity since the latter part of the 20th century, resulting in describing ethnic and cultural identity as a "social process that is in flux for some proportion of the population" and that it is a "dynamic and complex social phenomenon" (Waters, 1990, p. 16). With digital media, this phenomenon takes on a new meaning as social networking relations, modes of online communication, and digital identities have been revealed to be far from neutral in terms of race and ethnicity (Sharma, 2013).

The term "diaspora" to describe an ethnic community was first used to describe migrations of people belonging to "nations without states," such as Jews or African slaves; however, the term is now used by many scholars almost as an equivalent of migration, in order to

highlight the transnationalism of the phenomenon, focusing on the distinguishing characteristics of immigration, namely circularity, continuity, and multidirectionality (Ferraiuolo, 2006). In a study on the Italian diaspora of Boston's North End, Ferraiuolo (2006) explains that part of this transnationalism refers to activities oriented toward the reinforcement of national identity abroad and that these characteristics do not just belong to the first and second generations, but also to later generations. This approach suggests that identity is formed not only at local levels, but also at national levels, and is not limited to first-generation immigrants (Ferraiuolo, 2006). Thus, Ferraiuolo (2006) argues that the diasporic phenomenon of Italian migration and its consequence can be seen not only on a large scale but also through that of a "neighborhood."

The idea of social media as a "neighborhood" unto itself has not yet been explored through the lens of ethnic identity; however, Gibbons (2020) explained that social media can create a sense of local attachment for the user that is demonstrated in three basic dimensions: the extent to which people experience belonging (i.e., a sense of inclusion in a place), cooperation (i.e., the ability to cooperate with neighbors), and trust (i.e., the faith that neighbors have one another's best interests in mind). Applying Ferraiuolo's (2006) definition of an ethnic neighborhood to Gibbons' (2020) definition of a digital neighborhood, one can assume that social media can help strengthen a person's ethnic ties by providing a place to express ideas, meet other people of the same ethnicity, and discover more about their ethnic origins from trusted sources. The goal of this study is to examine the relationship between ethnicity, cultural knowledge, and message framing through the use of #italianamerican on Instagram.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study will be conducted through the lens of Collier's cultural identity theory as well as that of framing theory. Collier developed cultural identity theory in the late 1980s to describe how diversity is realized in a cultural group, given that the members of that group all have multiple cultural identities in addition to shared group membership (Littlejohn et al., p. 78). This theory also deals with constructing the social identities of cultural groups, and the ways in which those identities are communicated, using the term "avowal" to describe how a person describes his or her own cultural identity, and the term "ascription" to describe how a person refers to the cultural identities of others (Littlejohn et al., p. 78).

Collier's research found that individuals' impressions of situated intercultural competence reflected multiple cultural group identities and that these were situationally/relationally contingent, differing in salience and intensity of avowal and ascription, and were often contradictory (Collier, 2015). Collier has called for clearer, more complex, and contextually contingent conceptualizations of cultures, discovering those who aligned with a particular national or ethnic group described very different ideas of appropriate and effective conduct, partly dependent on their other cultural identifications and those of their conversational partners (Collier, 2015).

Collier's cultural identity theory provides a framework for studies in the realm of cultural identity due to the highly subjective nature of the premises of avowal and ascription. A person's avowal of one ethnicity and/or culture can vary based on a variety of factors. For example, Waters described ethnicity and culture as a choice, citing an example of African Americans who are "highly socially constrained to identify as blacks, without other options available to them,

even when they believe or know that their forebears included many non-blacks" (Waters, p. 18). Applying Collier's cultural identity theory to this example, any person of African American origin might avow their cultural heritage in a way that is not in line with the racial and cultural heritage that is ascribed to them.

For the purpose of this study, Collier's cultural identity theory will be used when determining how people who post on Instagram using #italianamerican avow or ascribe Italian American identity through their content. In particular, this study will examine if the posts were made from a strong, weak, or neutral cultural view as described in the codebook that was provided to an independent coder for this research. The codebook, as well as the criteria for analysis, will be further outlined in the methodology section of this paper.

In addition to Collier's cultural identity theory, this paper will also examine the frame of the #italianamerican posts via framing theory. According to Clark and Nyaupane (2020), framing theory postulates that the media not only creates saliency towards certain issues and events, but it can also potentially influence how people interpret them. Also, while the media can bring issues and events to our attention, there is a high degree of variability as to how media frames affect individuals' choices and opinions, meaning that public opinion can be successfully swayed if media messages invoke certain values or ideological principles (Clark & Nyaupane, 2020).

For their study of the behavioral effects of framing on social media users, Valenzuela et al. (2020) conceptualize frames as the dominant set of aspects and considerations emphasized by a news story, independent of the story's specific topic. Framing implies that news content is constructed through features that provide clues about the interpretation of the text and the news event itself, including a wide array of presentation elements, such as the presence (or absence) of specific keywords, phrases, or stereotypes (Valenzuela et al., 2020).

This study will use framing theory to determine how the messages contained in the #italianamerican posts were framed on Instagram. Potential frames for the #italianamerican posts analyzed as part of this study include very positive, positive, neutral, negative, and very negative depictions of Italian American culture as described in the codebook. Again, the codebook, as well as the criteria for analysis, will be further outlined in the methodology section of this paper.

Literature Review

Social media is a place where users can freely express their cultural identity on their own terms. Dey et al. (2018) studied young British South Asian use of selfies on social media and how they endorse and reinforce their cultural identity. Dey et al. (2018) believe that cultural identity as portrayed on social media is influenced by four factors, namely the consonance between host and ancestral cultures, situational constraints, contextual requirements, and convenience. Dey et al. (2018) claim that the youths' appropriation of the selfie phenomenon shows how both their acculturation and cultural identity are expressed in their posts. Finally, Dey et al. (2018) stressed that cultural identity can be expressed through the use and appropriation of technology, especially social media.

Radwan (2022) believes that social media's effect on cultural identity is a matter of constant concern. Radwan (2022) studied 360 quantitative questionnaire respondents from rural people in Bamha village, Egypt. The results showed that for two-fifths of the respondents (40%) the level of change in cultural identity was high in relation to their use of social media and that there is a significant relationship between some independent variables of respondents and the degree of change in their cultural identity (Radwan, 2022). Radwan (2022) also believes that individuals' cultural frame is crucial as social, economic, ethnic, linguistic, and spiritual disparities can contribute both to cultural discord and imbalanced personalities and that when

discussing cultural features, it is impossible to avoid mentioning the cultural experiences of individuals.

Sunarti et al. (2022) studied the Buginese who settled in Malaysia and how they perceived their Bugis identity, as they were considered a unique case by having strong social linkage to their host country and region, while they remained proud of their country of origin. Sunarti et al. (2022) explored the development of the identity of the Malaysian Buginese through the establishment of various communities on social media, which were used as a channel of networking that linked the Buginese community's present with its past, causing their cultural identity to be one that is ever transforming, influenced by growing history, culture, and authority.

One's cultural identity can also affect how different messages on social media are perceived. Dobbins et al. (2021) sought to explore how cultural identity affects the use of and engagement with social media content related to agriculture and the environment. This study indicated differences in social media engagement between people from different cultures, including various definitions and perspectives on cultural identity that emerged (Dobbins et al., 2021). Dobbins et al. (2021) also explained that interactions within social media have become networked, cultural, relationship-oriented, and dialogical, as people engage with social media outlets because they offer a way for them to feel as if they are being heard and that their thoughts and feelings are respected. Dobbins et al. (2021) further explained that not all social groups share the same values, standards, ideologies, or experiences and that the concept of identity relates to the social process of perception and differentiation by individuals or groups with which an individual feels similar or different. Individuals classify themselves and others into social categories which have significant effects on the psychological and sociological aspects of group behavior (Dobbins et al., 2021).

Due to its changing definition, identity is something that can be framed on social media to promote a specific message. Roberts (2011) wrote that nationality, race, social class, gender, and communitarianism are all construed differently in diverse contexts around the world and that it is necessary to understand the interplays and permutations of such markers. Roberts (2011) explained that cultures enjoy a dialogue that serves as their own identity negotiation or a continuing dialogue with itself that is negotiated through a variety of dialogic practices, such as narrative, including what has been framed by mass media. Finally, Roberts (2011) writes that culture presents itself through a variety of narratively contested accounts, such as those of human interaction and the accounts of normative attitudes and evaluative stances about those interactions.

Finally, Wagner et al. (2017) discussed post framing on social media as something that can provoke either positive or negative user reactions and interactions. According to Wagner et al. (2017) the overall theme of a post or its "post appeal" is a determining factor in its success, which can be either positive or negative. Wagner et al. (2017) also explained that users themselves can interpret post framing differently, depending on their own backgrounds and frame of reference, which means that post effectiveness will vary depending on the user.

Methodology

After conducting the literature review for this study, it was evident that there was a lack of studies on members of American-based racial and ethnic groups and how they negotiate their respective cultural identities in the social media sphere and how the posts about these groups are framed. Some studies were found on African Americans and their expressed identity on social media in terms of politics, but there were no studies on the European-American diaspora and its general expression of cultural identity available. Similarly, articles discussing the framing of

culture in general on social media were available, but nothing that discussed how posts by and about specific ethnic groups were framed, especially in light of the digital neighborhoods that have sprung up as a place for these groups to interact and the various hashtags used by these groups to call attention to their cultures of origin.

In an attempt to bridge this gap in research, this study will address the following questions regarding the Italian American diaspora:

Q1: Are the majority of those who use #italianamerican of Italian American origin?

Q2: Is there a relationship between the #italianamerican posters' view of Italian American culture and the message frame of their posts?

Q3: Is there a relationship between the #italianamerican posters' ethnic identity and the cultural view of their posts?

Q4: Is there a relationship between the #italianamerican posters' ethnic identity and the message frame of their posts?

The quantitative research used for this study was found in the top 50 Instagram posts that used #italianamerican on November 1, 2022. The posts were collected and provided to an independent coder that followed the below codebook:

1. Unit of Data Collection: Most recent Instagram posts that use #italianamerican.
2. Post ID: Please provide the Instagram handle of the user who posted the content being analyzed for post identification purposes.
3. Poster Ethnicity: Please determine the poster's ethnicity by using the following scheme:

a. Italian American: The user's Italian American ethnicity is evident based on additional postings or the user's biography.

b. Not Italian American: The user either clearly states that he/she is not Italian American or there is something on his/her page or biography that demonstrates such.

c. Unknown: The user's ethnic origins are not clear to the coder.

4. Message frame: Please rate the posts' message frame by using the following scheme:

a. Very Negative: The post promotes a racist or anti-Italian American view, including the use of derogatory language such as "dago," "wop" or "guinea" or strong ethnic stereotyping.

b. Negative: The post includes negative views of Italian Americans, including the use of the "goombah" or "Mafioso" stereotypes. However, the post does not include derogatory or racist language or views.

c. Neutral: The post is neither positive nor negative in nature.

d. Positive: The post provides a positive view of Italian American culture, history, or lifestyle, but does not provide a call to action to learn more.

e. Very Positive: The post provides a positive view of Italian American culture, history, or lifestyle, and urges the user to visit a site or perform an additional action to learn more.

5. Cultural View: Please rate the posts' view of Italian American culture by using the following scheme:

a. Weak: The post demonstrates a lack of familiarity with Italian American culture.

b. Neutral: The post does not provide enough information to determine the poster's level of familiarity with Italian American culture.

c. Strong: The post demonstrates that the poster is familiar with Italian American culture through research or his/her family of origin.

The results from the codebook were then given to this researcher to run as a chi-square test of independence. Results from the codebook and the chi-square test will be provided in the next section.

Results and Analysis

Q1: Are the majority of those who use #italianamerican of Italian American origin?
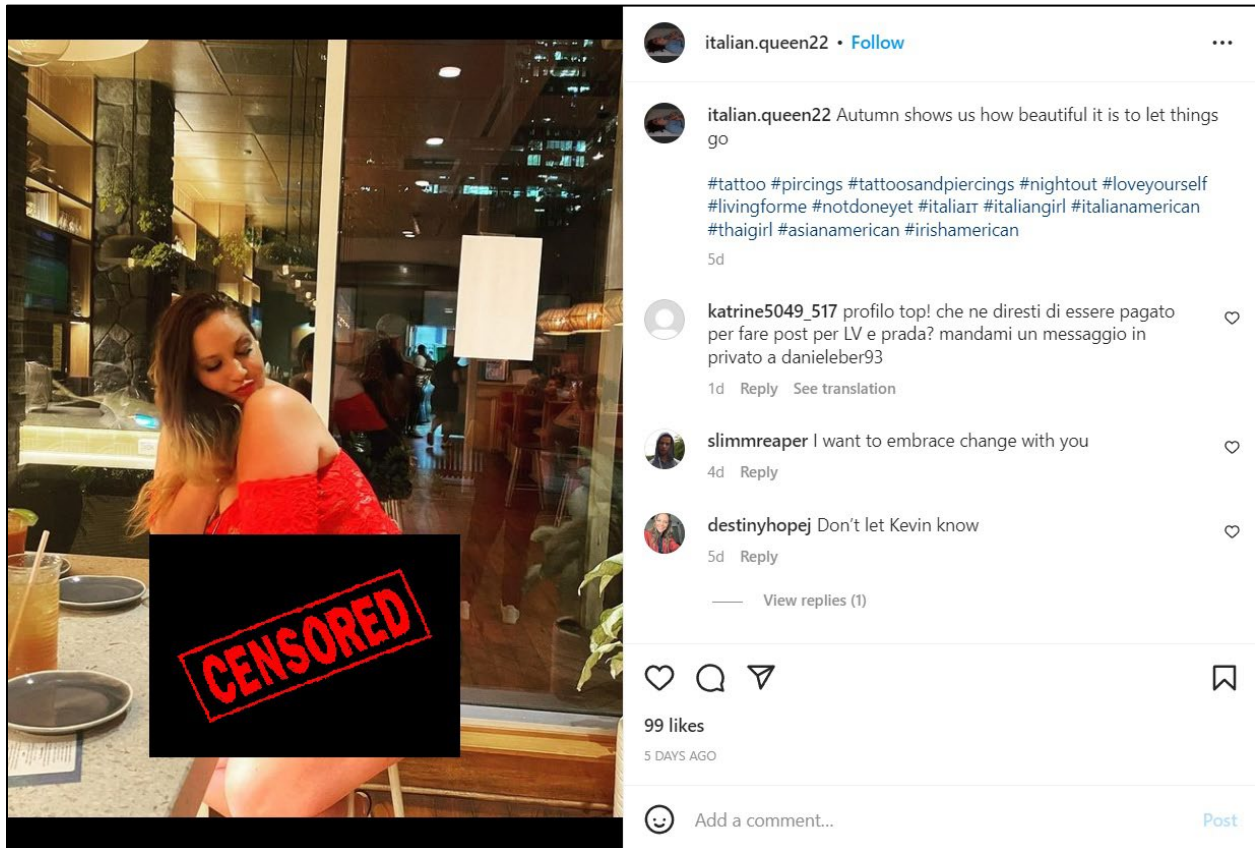

■ Italian American   ■ Not Italian American   ■ Unknown
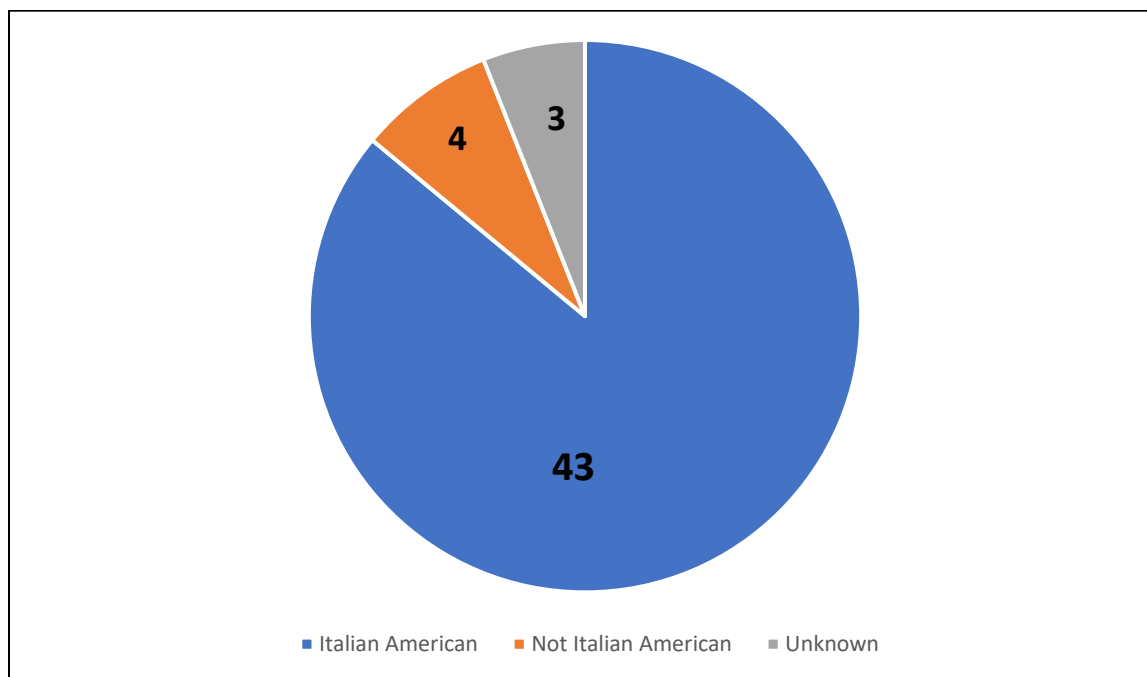
According to the coder's analysis of the #italianmerican posts, 43 out of 50 (86%) posts were made by Italian Americans. Four posts (8%) were made by non-Italian Americans, and three posts (6%) were made by posters of unknown ethnic origin. Again, to receive the "Italian

American" designation, the poster's ethnicity needed to be evident based on additional postings or the user's biography. To receive the "Not Italian American" designation, the user either clearly stated that he/she is not Italian American or there is something on his/her page or biography that demonstrates such, while to receive the "Unknown" designation, the user's ethnic origins were unclear to the coder.

Based on these results, the answer to Q1 is that the majority of those who use #italianamerican are of Italian American origin. This is an important designation to make in terms of cultural identity because, per Collier's cultural identity theory, the people using #italianamerican are mainly celebrating their own Italian American heritage, which means that they are posting as an avowal of their ethnic culture versus ascribing traits to the culture that may or may not be true. This is also necessary to know in terms of framing theory because the frame of the Italian Americans' posts comes from a place of intimate knowledge of the culture.

Q2: Is there a relationship between the #italianamerican posters' view of Italian culture and the message frame of their posts?

To fully study this research question, the independent coder was asked to rate posts according to the scheme presented in the codebook. No posts were rated as "Very Negative," which was a designation reserved for posts that promote a racist or anti-Italian American view, including the use of derogatory language such as "dago," "wop" or "guinea" or strong ethnic stereotyping. Below are illustrations and explanations of the other criteria.

The above post was labeled as "Negative" because, according to the coder, it includes a negative view of Italian Americans. For the purpose of this paper, the nudity in the post was censored, but it was felt that this post portrays the stereotype of Italian American women that they are brash and sexually forward. This was the only post labeled as "Negative" in this study.
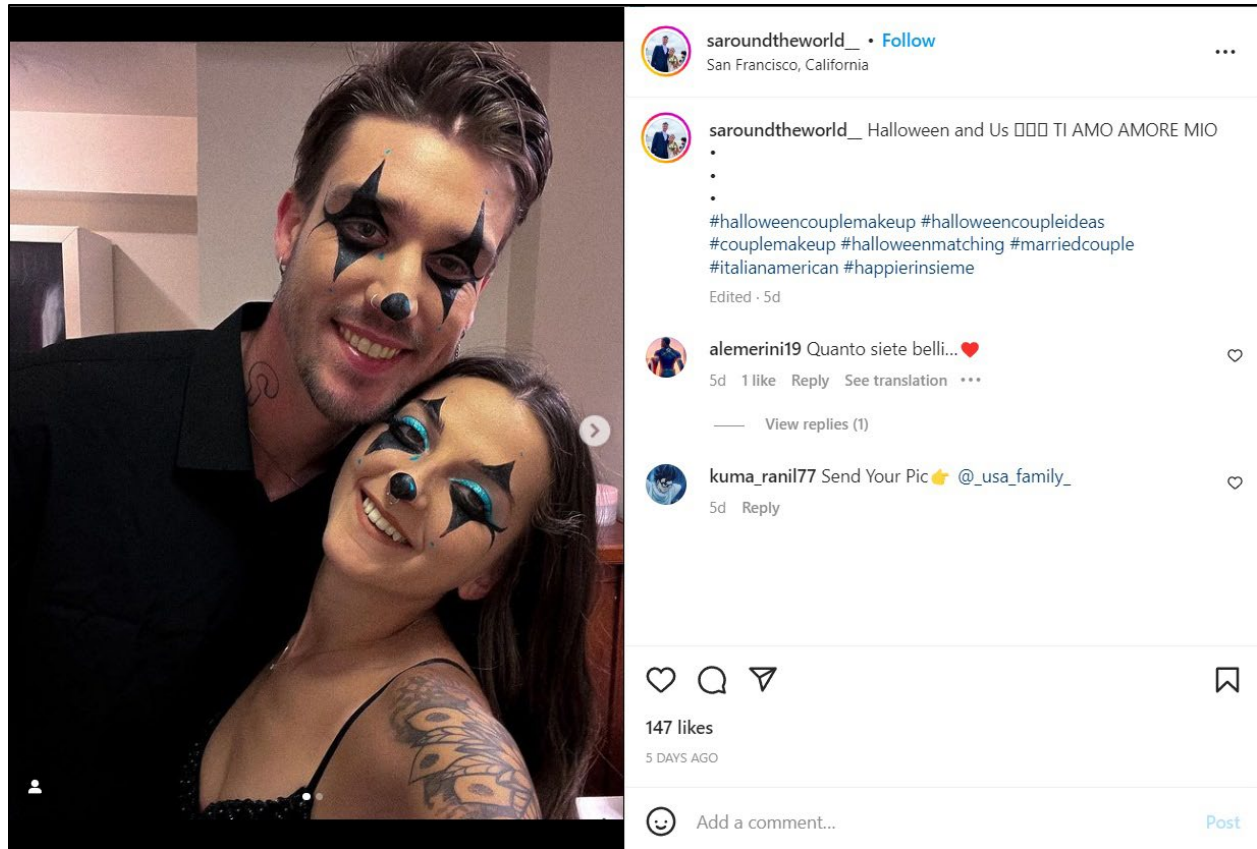
The above post was labeled as "Neutral" because it was neither positive nor negative in nature according to the coder. This post was of a couple of Italian American origin celebrating Halloween. The poster uses a hashtag in both English and Italian, #happierinsieme (happier together), but does not go beyond this in terms of presenting ethnic culture. In total, 18 out of 50 (36%) of the posts were labeled "Neutral."

This post provides a positive view of Italian American culture, history, or lifestyle, and was ranked "Positive" by the coder. While this post focused on a major Italian American celebration, the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve, no additional information was given, especially regarding how to read the essay for which the collage was created. In total, 12 out of 50 (24%) of the posts were labeled "Positive."
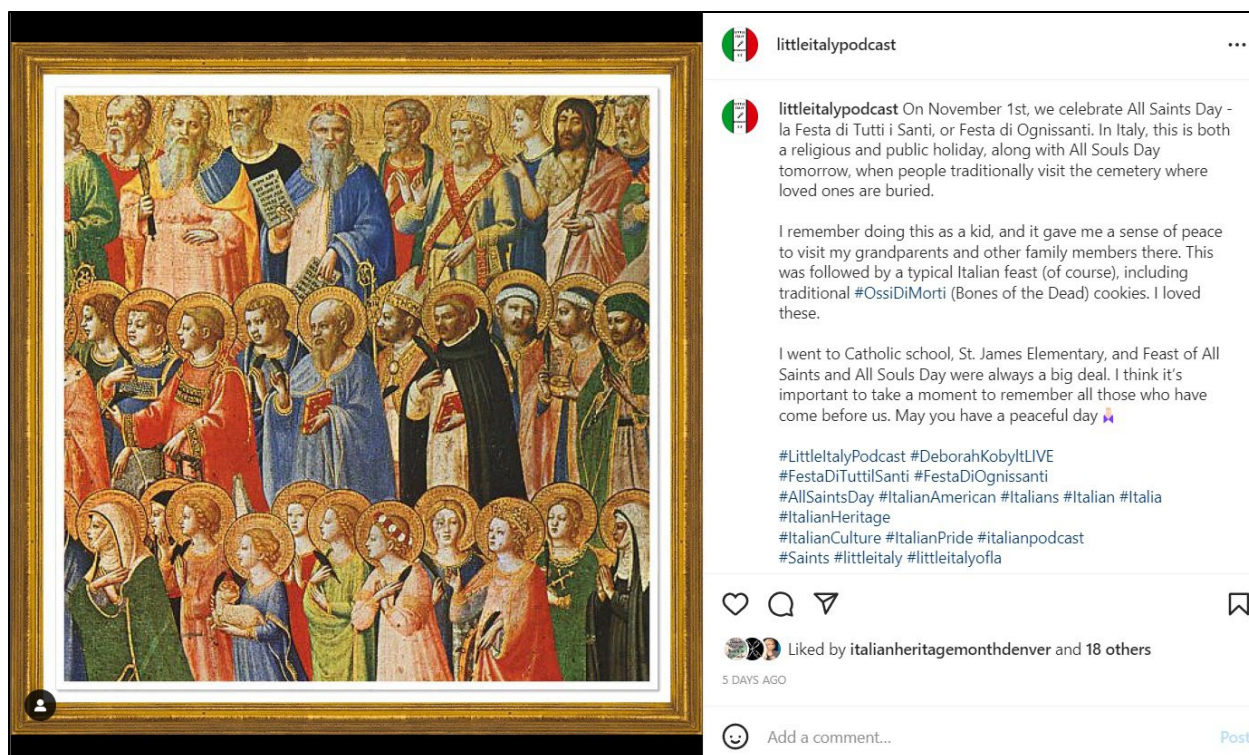
This post received a "Very Positive" designation from the coder because it provides a positive view of Italian American culture, along with additional information to learn more, such as the recipe for Ossi di Morti (Bones of the Dead) cookies in the comments, as well as a description of how the author celebrated All Saints Day in their family of origin. In total, 19 out of 50 (38%) of the posts were labeled "Very Positive."

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the posters' view of Italian American culture and the message frame of their posts. The relationship between these variables was significant, X^2 (6, N = 50) = 51.691, p = <.001. Thus, there is a relationship between the posters' view of Italian American culture and the message frame of their posts. Considering the fact that it was determined that the majority of the #italianamerican posters are of Italian American origin, it is clear that these posts are an avowal of their ethnic heritage. Also, because the posts are written from the lens of the posters' ethnic backgrounds, the

frames of the messages posted are naturally neutral, positive, or very positive due to the fact that the posters are attempting to avow their heritage digitally and to present themselves as Italian Americans to other Italian American users or to those who might be interested in learning more about the culture.

Q3: Is there a relationship between the #italianamerican posters' ethnic identity and the cultural view of their posts?

The independent coder was also asked to rate each post in terms of cultural view, with "Weak" demonstrating a lack of familiarity with Italian American culture, while posts designated as "Neutral" do not provide enough information to determine the poster's level of familiarity with Italian American culture. Finally, posts designated as "Strong" demonstrate that the poster is familiar with Italian American culture through research or his or her family of origin. In total, two posts (4%) were ranked "Weak," 19 (38%) were ranked as "Neutral," and 29 (58%) were ranked as "Strong." Using the examples presented for Q2, below are explanations of the coder's designations.

The above post was designated as having a "Weak" cultural view because it does not show familiarity with Italian American culture. In fact, this post uses several ethnic-based hashtags without any reasoning as to why.
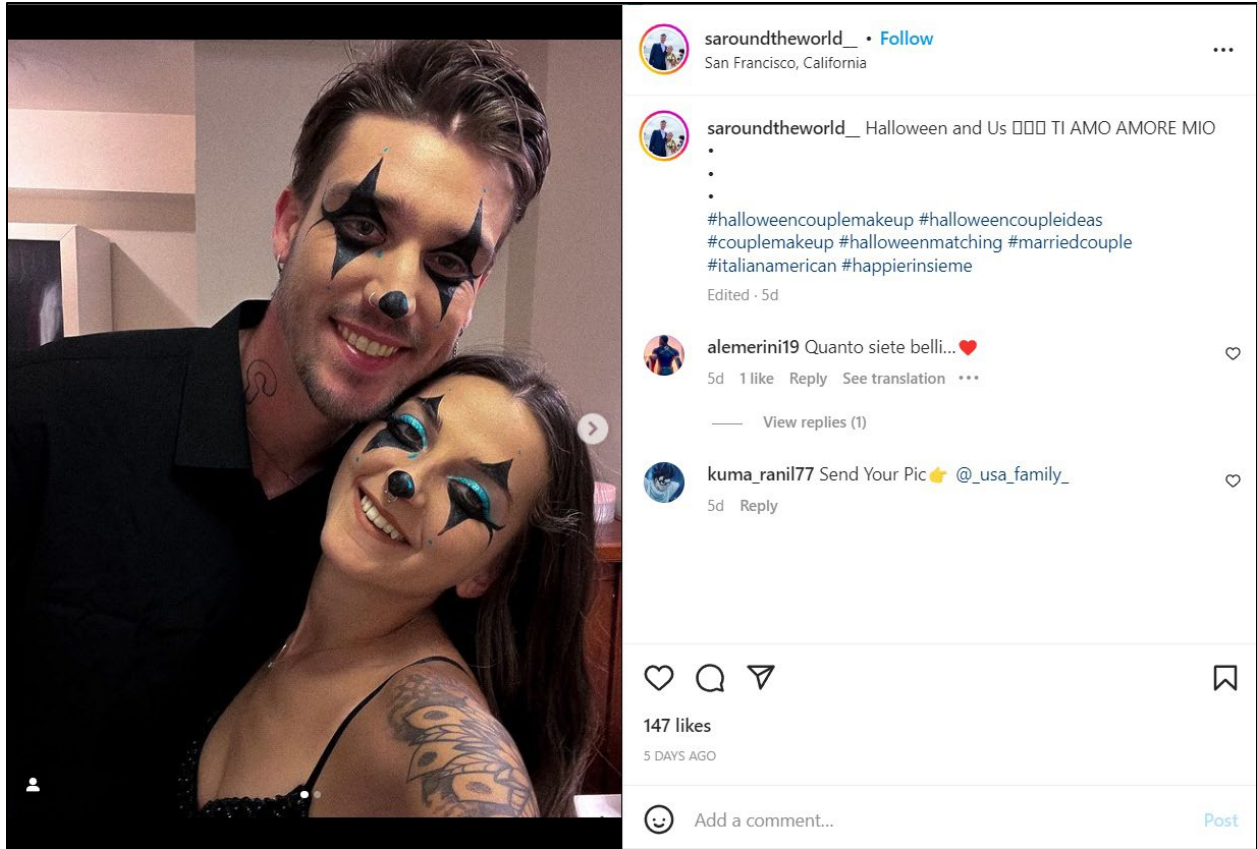
This post was deemed "Neutral" as it does not provide enough information to determine the poster's level of familiarity with Italian American culture.
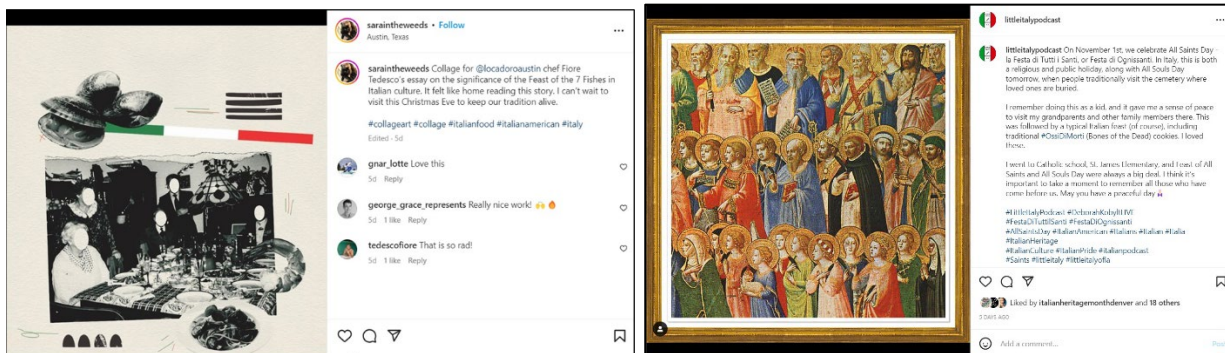
Finally, the above posts were deemed "Strong" because they demonstrated a familiarity with Italian American culture on the part of the person posting the content.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between poster ethnic identity and cultural view based on the coding mentioned above. The relationship between these variables was significant, X^2 (4, N = 50) = 17.013, p = .002. Thus, there is a relationship between the posters' ethnicity and the cultural view of their posts. Once again, this can be attributed to the fact that the known Italian American posters are simply avowing their heritage on the digital stage. Their views of Italian American culture will naturally be strong because it is their culture of origin, and the posts they write will be framed by this culture.

Q4: Is there a relationship between the #italianamerican posters' ethnic identity and the message frame of their posts?

A chi-square test of independence was also performed to examine the relationship between poster ethnic identity and the message frame of their posts as described above. The relationship between these variables was not significant, X^2 (6, N = 50) = 9.488, p = .148. Thus, there is not a relationship between the posters' ethnic identity and the cultural view of their posts. This result takes into consideration the fact that not all people who enjoy learning about Italian American culture are of Italian origin. Someone could write a positive post about Italian Americans simply because they enjoy Italian food, cinema, music, etc. Positive connotations of Italian American culture are not exclusive to Italian Americans, even though they make up the majority of users using #italianamerican.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Study

This study has illustrated how #italianamerican is used on Instagram, providing insight into how ethnicity and cultural view are associated. This study also showed that message frame and ethnicity are not linked, as anyone can admire and respect a culture and post a positive

message about it on social media, even if it is not their culture of origin. Finally, this study showed that ethnic Italian Americans tend to have a stronger view of their culture as seen in their posts. This study was rather limited in scope, as 50 posts is a small sample size. Future studies of the above hypotheses could include a larger sample size, as well as a comparative study of various social media platforms that use hashtags, such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. An additional future study could also include a comparative study analyzing hashtag usage for other European American ethnic groups, including Irish Americans and German Americans.

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