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Hashtags and heritage: the use of #italianamerican on Instagram

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Abstract

Purpose: 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 valence 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 valence 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.

Design/methodology: This simple exploratory study examined the 50 most recent Instagram posts using #italianamerican as they appeared on November 1, 2022. The posts were sent to two independent coders who analyzed their visual content.

Findings: This study provides insight into how ethnicity and cultural familiarity are associated. Results show that message valence 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 familiarity with their culture of origin, as demonstrated by the posts selected for this study.

Implications: This study showed that Italian Americans use social media to educate others about their heritage, as well as to celebrate their culture of origin.

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Value: The methods used in this study could be applied to other European American ethnic groups and their social media usage, including Irish Americans, Polish Americans, and German Americans, among others.

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

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 sports, as well as 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: 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 (Ferrauiolo 2006). In a study on the Italian diaspora of Boston's North End, Ferrauiolo (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. Thus, Ferrauiolo 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’ 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.

European immigration to the United States has been an ongoing phenomenon, with the first significant wave spanning the 16th to 18th centuries, consisting mostly of settlers from the British Isles attracted by economic opportunity and religious freedom; while additional Irish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants who were fleeing famine, religious persecution, and political conflicts arrived during the 1840s and 1850s (Alperin and Batalova 2023). After a pause in European immigration during the U.S. Civil War, more than 20 million immigrants arrived – primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe – between 1880 and 1920. Most Southern European immigrants were motivated by economic opportunity in the United States, while Eastern Europeans (primarily Jews) fled religious persecution and political upheaval. World War I slowed European immigration, and the national-origin quotas established in 1921 and 1924 – which gave priority to Western and Northern Europeans – coupled with the Great Depression and the onset of World War II brought American immigration from Europe to a near halt. Even though the 1965 Immigration Act did away with country quotas, by then fewer Europeans were seeking to cross the Atlantic either because their economic fortunes had improved during postwar reconstruction or because their communist governments restricted emigration. The fall of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s ushered in the most recent wave of European immigration, dominated by people from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; however, the number of European immigrants in the United States has declined slightly since 2000.

Today, the descendants of these immigrants seek to maintain their ethnic ties in a variety of ways, including through festivals, religious observances, and foodways. According to the Migration Policy Institute’s tabulation of the 2016 United States Census Bureau American Community Survey, the European-origin diaspora in the United States is composed of approximately 133 million people who were either born in Europe or reported European ancestry, and the European diaspora accounts for

41 % of the 323 million people living in the United States (Alperin and Batalova 2023). Results also showed that the German diaspora is the largest of all major European–American ethnic groups, with 14 % of all United States residents, or 45 million individuals, either reporting German ancestry or having been born in Germany. Ireland and the United Kingdom were also among the top diaspora groups, followed by Italy, France, and Poland.

The 2016 United States Census Bureau American Community Survey also showed that, while not the largest European–American diaspora, the Italian community does account for 5.2 % of the country's entire population (Alperin and Batalova 2023). While each European–American ethnic group observes and preserves its heritage in its own way, the case of the Italian American community is particularly interesting, as avowals of its heritage were born out of ethnic discrimination and prejudice lobbed at them upon arrival in the late 19th century, continuing well into the 20th century (Guglielmo 2004). The concept of *Italianità* or “Italianness” was born out of the early years of migration and settlement in the United States, where the newcomers’ strongest allegiance was to their homeland. This concept influenced how the Italian newcomers to the United States and their descendants viewed and expressed themselves and the world around them.

This paper seeks to begin a conversation on how cultural identity is expressed on social media by examining the Italian American community’s usage of #italian-american on Instagram. This study will examine the relationship between their ethnicity, cultural familiarity, and message valence through a quantitative study that analyzes how Italian Americans avow their culture online. By examining the relationship between the posters’ cultural familiarity and message valence as seen through #italianamerican, this study seeks to determine if social media is a new type of ethnic digital neighborhood where users are free to express their cultural identity, exchange ideas and meet other people who share their ethnic identity, as well as teach users who do not share their same ethnic background about their culture.

1 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. 2017: 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. This study specifically deals with how users are avowing their Italian American identity on Instagram, while the independent coding is ascribing characteristics to each post, such as whether they are positive or negative in nature. Overall, this study seeks to determine how the cultural identity of Italian Americans can be expressed via social media, specifically through Instagram.

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. This aspect of Collier’s research is particularly relevant to this study, as it demonstrates how cultural identity can vary from person to person, and how interpretations of a person’s cultural identity are also subjective.

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 (1990) 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 1990: 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. This study seeks to determine how the avowal of one’s ethnic heritage can be seen on social media, including whether it plays into potential stereotypes or not.

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 valence 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. Post valence or tonality is necessary to this study because how the post is presented on social media can influence how a person interprets it. If a post invokes a stereotypical representation of a group, viewers might be more likely to ascribe those traits to the group as a whole.

For their study of the behavioral effects of framing on social media users, Valenzuela et al. (2017) 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.'s study also helps set the discussion for post valence in this study because the social media posts contain clues and cues that can influence how that post will be interpreted by users.

This study will use framing theory to determine the valence of the messages contained in the #italianamerican posts on Instagram. Potential valences 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.

2 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. 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. The understanding of the relationship between the host and ancestral culture is useful to the development of additional studies on cultural identity as portrayed on social media because the users creating the posts are often seeking to make sense of their ancestral culture as they negotiate day-to-day life in their ancestral culture. The authors claim that the youths' appropriation of the selfie phenomenon shows how both their acculturation and cultural identity are expressed in their posts, as the posts show a marriage between the two. Finally, Dey et al. stressed that cultural identity can be expressed through the use and

appropriation of technology, especially social media. While the authors explain that cultural identity can be expressed on social media, the authors do not go into detail about the valence of those posts and if they are positive or negative portrayals, or if they accurately express a user's familiarity with the ancestral culture.

Ferraiuolo's (2006) study is an important introduction to understanding the development of ethnic neighborhoods because these places help construct and reinforce identity, especially in circumstances where people from one town settled in the same place. Descendants of the immigrants are given the opportunity to learn about their ethnic culture not only from their parents but also from the extended "family" of the neighborhood, even if they are not blood related. Combining this approach with Gibbons' (2020) definition of a digital neighborhood as a place where people can experience a sense of belonging and trust within a specific community, one can assume that social media can also 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, just as they did in the physical neighborhoods described by Ferraiuolo (2006).

Radwan (2022) believes that social media's effect on cultural identity is a matter of constant concern and 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 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. Radwan's study shows that cultural identity and expression can vary from person to person and that social media can enhance that expression because it is a place where the exchange of ideas can flow freely, creating the digital neighborhood as previously mentioned. This study also demonstrates how disparities in cultural identity can help create a conversation on what it means to be a part of a specific ethnic community and how those differences play out in the digital sphere.

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. The authors 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. While not a study

specific to the European diaspora in America, this study sheds light on ethnic homeland attachment while creating an affective bond with the host culture, as the Buginese community sought out new ways to maintain its ties to its culture by incorporating social media. The social networking as described by Sunarti et al. demonstrates a system of linkages between people belonging to a specific ethnic culture, where specific posts serve to demonstrate pride as well as aspects of the culture where other users, either belonging to the culture or not, may lack familiarity.

In terms of ethnic American cultural identity as expressed on social media, in a study on the Latinx community, Villa-Nicholas (2019) argued that its digital memory is an active process of *Latinidad* identity, nostalgia, activism, and capital sponsorship in real time that does the work of recalling the identities of the past while remapping that identity onto the present. Citing Instagram as one of the most prominent places where *Latinidad* is expressed due to its focus on visual content, the author also argues that this digital memory must be taken seriously as part of the Latinx memory archive, showing trends such as nostalgia around Latinx identity, the corporate sponsorship of Latinx memory, and the resistance to hegemonic *Latinidad* narratives. This study expands upon Villa-Nicholas' study by showing how digital memory can be applied to other ethnic American groups and how this online avowal of ethnic heritage can serve as an educational tool for present and future generations.

In a study of Asian American influencer cultural identity portrayal on Instagram, King and Fretwell (2022), determined that social media provides minority groups with control over their portrayals, allowing them to refute stereotypes. The authors argue that Asian American influencers on Instagram communicate a type of cultural hybridity that includes the use of Asian, American/Western, and Asian American cultural values, products, and behaviors, indicating that social media can provide fluid, authentic representations of identity. King and Fretwell's study on Asian Americans serves as a companion to Villa-Nicholas' (2019) study on the Latinx community because both demonstrate how social media allows ethnic minorities the chance to tell their own story on social media. The current study expands on King and Fretwell's (2022) work by incorporating the use of a specific ethnic hashtag into the conversation, #italianamerican, and by incorporating users who may not be influencers but who avow the Italian American ethnicity.

According to McKenzie (2022), digital media are powerful developmental tools in terms of cultural development, as they support cultural identity exploration and commitment. In a study focusing on Hmong American youth's usage of digital media, McKenzie found that digital media also enables the preservation and transformation of ethnic culture and that digital media can be used to explore and express cultural identity, as well as to escape and reshape cultural values. This article helps lay the foundation for the current study, as both studies focus on cultural identity expression via digital media. However, the current study also takes into consideration how

additional uses of social media beyond simply creating a post also serve as an expression of cultural identity. The additional focus on hashtags also helps determine whether social media can be considered a type of ethnic digital neighborhood where like-minded users can seek each other out and exchange ideas.

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. The authors 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.

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. The author 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, 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. Identity is something that is constantly negotiated, and social media is one of the most significant places where this negotiation can happen. Roberts helps bolster the current study because it shows how cultural identity is negotiated through interaction. The posts included in this study interact with their ethnic culture by portraying a specific story that the user wishes to tell the people who are then viewing these posts, thus setting up the potential for dialogue.

Wagner et al. (2017) discussed post valence on social media as something that can provoke either positive or negative user reactions and interactions. The overall theme of a post or its "post appeal" is a determining factor in its success, which can be either positive or negative. The authors also explained that users themselves can interpret post valence differently, depending on their own backgrounds and frame of reference, which means that post effectiveness will vary depending on the user. Post valence is critical to this study because the tone of a post shapes the story it tells. Much like the information provided by Dobbins et al. (2021), a post's tone runs the risk of portraying an inaccurate or stereotypical image because of viewer subjectivity based on a variety of factors that the original poster does not know.

When viewed in isolation, visual images deliver stronger framing effects than text, and that frames provided by images exert a dominant influence over behavioral intentions (Powell et al. 2015). How content is posted on social media may also affect users' attitudes, as demonstrated by Ballejo et al. (2021). Posts on social media may be framed in such a way that a certain meaning is conveyed, and the authors demonstrated that the visual framing of online content influences how users respond to the information. Social media users should exercise caution when posting in order to avoid spreading misinformation or provoking a negative reaction.

3 Methodology

After conducting the literature review for this study, it was evident that there was a lack of quantitative studies on members of European–American racial and ethnic groups and how they negotiate their respective cultural identities in the social media sphere, including the valence of their posts. 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 community and its general expression of cultural identity available (Krogstad 2015). Similarly, articles discussing the valence of culture in general on social media were available, but nothing that discussed the general tone of posts by and about specific ethnic groups, 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' familiarity with Italian American culture and the message valence of their posts?

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

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

Familiarity with Italian American culture was studied first because this study assumed that people using #italianamerican would either be of Italian origin or have extensive knowledge of that culture's history and traditions. Cultural familiarity was determined by the coders from the posters' overall comments and account information. It was measured as weak, neutral, or strong. Ethnic identity was studied after

cultural familiarity because this study assumed that most people using #italian-american who demonstrated a strong familiarity with the culture would be of Italian origin. Finally, message valence was studied because this study assumed that those using #italianamerican most likely would present the culture in a way that was meaningful to them.

The quantitative research used for this study was found in the top 50 most recent Instagram posts that used #italianamerican as of November 1, 2022. Instagram was chosen because of its focus on visual content as well as the ability to access accounts set to public, even if the users are posting to personal accounts. The posts were chosen by searching #italianamerican and choosing the first 50 posts that appeared in the search. Three accounts: @scopabriscola, @niafitalianamerican, and @tonymangia, had two posts each that were in the top 50. The posts were collected and provided to two independent coders. One coder was of Italian American origin, while the other was not. The non-Italian American coder is a professional historian who is familiar with 19th and 20th-century European immigration to the United States, including Italian immigrants. Given the coder's familiarity with Italian heritage, they were deemed an appropriate coder for this research project. This researcher explained the following codebook to the coders, who were asked to provide their results within one week of receiving the posts. Coders were asked to examine how posts were presented, including photo composition and captions, to answer the below prompts. Coders were not asked to examine comments and reactions to posts, however some comments are included in the results section to further illustrate the findings presented by the research.

The codebook presented to the independent coders is as follows:

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 valence: Please rate the posts' message valence 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. 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 Familiarity: Please rate the posts’ familiarity with 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 coders’ results were given to this researcher to run an intercoder reliability test based on their judgment regarding poster ethnicity, Italian American cultural familiarity, and message valence. Cohen’s κ was run to determine if there was agreement between the independent coders’ judgment on the posters’ perceived ethnicity based on the Instagram posts studied. In this instance, there was moderate agreement, $\kappa = 0.573$, 95 % CI [0.355, 0.791], $p < 0.001$. Cohen’s κ was then run to determine if there was agreement between the independent coders’ judgment on the posters’ familiarity with Italian American culture based on the Instagram posts studied. In this instance, there was a very strong agreement, $\kappa = 0.841$, 95 % CI [0.692, 0.99], $p < 0.001$. Finally, Cohen’s κ was run to determine if there was agreement between the independent coders’ judgment regarding message valence based on the Instagram posts studied. In this instance, there was also a very strong agreement between the independent coders, $\kappa = 0.881$, 95 % CI [0.769, 0.993], $p < 0.001$.

Because of the high reliability of the independent coders’ results based on the Cohen’s κ tests, this researcher then took the overall results from the codebook to run as chi-square tests of independence, casting the deciding vote in the instances where the independent coders disagreed in terms of either cultural familiarity or message valence. This method of the researcher acting as arbiter is established as an acceptable method of resolving coder discrepancies (Belur et al. 2021). Because this is a small exploratory study, a chi-square test of independence is an appropriate means of measurement because a significant chi-square can facilitate more specific interpretation in exploratory analysis (Buckalew and Pearson 1982). Also, a chi-square test

of independence studies nominal variables, which are present in all four of the research questions for this study. Other tests, such as a Pearson correlation, do not study nominal variables. Results from the chi-square tests are provided in the next section, and a full listing of all posts analyzed, including links, is included in Appendix A. Additional information about each post is included in Appendix B. It should be noted that due to the fluidity of social media accounts, some accounts that were public at the time of the study are now private and a direct link is no longer available. At the time of the study, screenshots of all posts were taken in order to accurately capture what was explicitly shown on social media at the time and to have something to refer back to for future study.

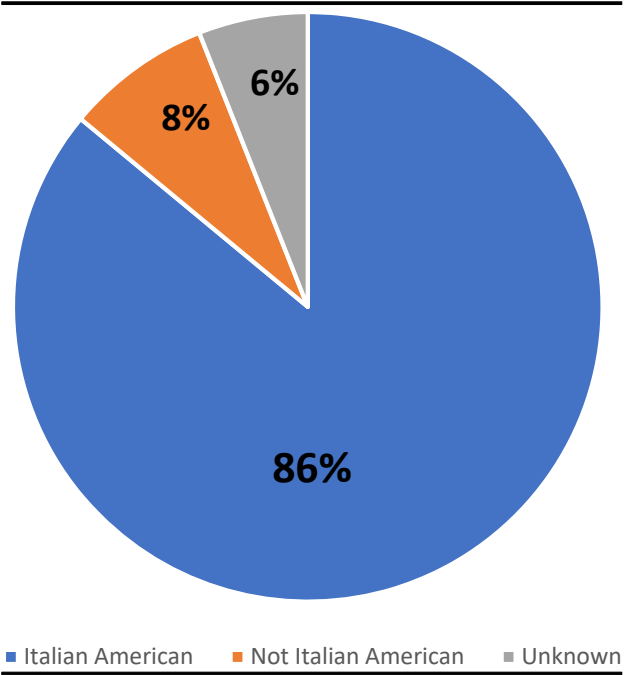
4 Results and analysis

Q1: Are the majority of those who use #italianamerican of Italian American origin? (Table 1).

While it may be difficult to determine ethnicity online because of limited available information, coders were asked to determine poster ethnicity by examining the author's last name or if the author explicitly stated his or her ethnicity in a profile or biography. These cues may be useful but are not completely reliable. However, according to the coders' analysis of the #italianamerican 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, which could include implicit or explicit avowals of another ethnic heritage. In order to receive the "Unknown" designation, the user's ethnic origins were unclear to the coders.

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 because the tonality of the Italian Americans' posts therefore comes from a place of intimate knowledge of the culture. Users of Italian American origin would often comment on the #italianamerican posts, either with a heart emoji

Table 1: Are the majority of those who use #italianamerican of Italian American origin?



to signify that they liked the post or with additional content. For example, on an image of a dish of shrimp pasta posted by @tonymangia, user @gattolosangeles commented “This dish has my name on it!” while user @virginiamondsini commented “Yummy, so good love dipping with bread.”

Q2: Is there a relationship between the #italianamerican posters’ familiarity with Italian culture and the message valence of their posts?

To fully study this research question, the independent coders were 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.

A post by @Italian.queen22 was labeled as “Negative” because, according to the coders, it includes a negative view of Italian Americans as it was felt that the post visually portrayed the stereotype of Italian American women that they are brash and sexually forward. While this research did not focus on the comments included in the

Instagram posts, this particular post demonstrates the negative stereotype as user @slimmreaper commented, “I want to embrace change with you,” which could be seen as sexual innuendo. This was the only post labeled as “Negative” in this study.

A post by @saroundtheworld_ was labeled as “Neutral” because it was neither positive nor negative in nature according to the coders. This post was of a couple of Italian American origin celebrating Halloween where the poster proclaimed her love for her significant other by writing, “TI AMO AMORE MIO,” (“I love you my love”), and employed a hashtag in both English and Italian, #happierinsieme (happier together), but the post did not go beyond these two examples in terms of presenting ethnic culture. The comments show that the poster may have friends or relatives in Italy, as one user, @aemerini19 commented “Quanto siete belli,” which means “How lovely you look.” In total, 18 out of 50 (36 %) of the posts were labeled “Neutral.”

A post by @saraintheweeds provided information about Italian American culture, history, or lifestyle, and, as such, was ranked “Positive” by the coders. While this post focused on a major Italian American holiday celebration, the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve, no additional information was given on what the Feast of the Seven Fishes is or how it is celebrated, nor was additional information provided 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.”

An All Saints Day post by @littleitalypodcast received a “Very Positive” designation from the coders because it provided a positive familiarity with 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 the holiday in their family of origin. The painting used for the image is “The Forerunners of Christ with Saints and Martyrs” by Fra Angelico, a painter of the early Italian Renaissance. The post avows Italian ethnicity while serving to educate others about an observance with which they might not be familiar. 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’ familiarity with Italian American culture and the message valence of their posts. The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 50) = 51.691, p \leq 0.001$. Thus, there is a relationship between the posters’ familiarity with Italian American culture and the message frame of their posts. The cross-tabulation for this research question can be seen in Table 2.

Considering the fact that it was determined that the majority of the #italian-american 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 tonality of the messages posted is 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

Table 2: Relationship between the #italianamerican posters’ familiarity with Italian culture and the message valence of their posts.

		Cultural familiarity				Total
			Neutral	Strong	Weak	
Valence	Neutral	Count	15	2	1	18
		Expected Count	6.8	10.4	0.7	18.0
	Negative	Count	0	0	1	1
		Expected count	0.4	0.6	0.0	1.0
	Positive	Count	2	10	0	12
		Expected count	4.6	7.0	0.5	12.0
	Very positive	Count	2	17	0	19
		Expected count	7.2	11.0	0.8	19.0
	Total	Count	19	29	2	50
		Expected count	19.0	29.0	2.0	50.0

Italian American users or to those who might be interested in learning more about the culture. Select comments on posts also served to highlight how users would avow their heritage online. For example, on a post by @scopabriscola highlighting how to play cards in Italy, several users commented on how they would like more information on how to play these games and how the point system used in Scopa or Briscola was often the only math they could understand.

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

The independent coders were also asked to rate each post in terms of the poster’s familiarity with Italian American culture, with “Weak” demonstrating a lack of familiarity, 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 either through research or his or her family of origin. In total, two posts (4 %) were ranked “Weak,” 19 (38 %) were ranked “Neutral,” and 29 (58 %) were ranked “Strong.” Using the examples presented for Q2, below are explanations of the coder’s designations.

The aforementioned post by @italian.queen22 was designated as having a “Weak” cultural view because it does not show familiarity with Italian American culture. Nothing in the image provides a glimpse of Italian culture, as the bar pictured might not necessarily be Italian or Italian American, and the caption regarding how autumn reminds us to let things go does not appear to fit with the

overall message the image conveys. This post also uses several ethnic-based hashtags without any reasoning as to why.

The post by @saroundtheworld_ was deemed “Neutral” as it does not provide enough information to determine the poster’s level of familiarity with Italian American culture. The Italian words and phrases used in the caption could have been discovered via a Google search, and the up-close picture of the couple does not reveal any Italian American imagery, such as specific jewelry or ethnic-themed tattoos. The couple’s Halloween face painting may be reminiscent of Venetian masks, but not enough information is provided to accurately make this determination.

Finally, the posts by @saraintheweeds and @littleitalypodcast were deemed “Strong” because they demonstrated a familiarity with Italian American culture on the part of the person posting the content. The post by @saraintheweeds clearly shows the poster’s intimate knowledge of the Feast of the Seven Fishes, as the photo includes a family gathered at a Christmas-themed table, along with several seafood-based dishes that families may serve for the feast. The post by @littleitalypodcast ties in Italian Renaissance art through the Fra Angelico painting, while telling a story about how the poster’s family celebrates both All Saints and All Souls Days. The recipe provided also allows viewers the opportunity to try a typical treat served for the observance that they may not have known about otherwise.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between poster ethnic identity and cultural familiarity based on the coding mentioned above. The relationship between these variables was significant, χ^2 (4, $N = 50$) = 17.013, $p = 0.002$. The crosstabulation for this research question is in Table 3.

Thus, there is a relationship between the posters’ ethnicity and the cultural familiarity 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 tone of the posts they write is influenced by this culture.

Table 3: Relationship between the #italianamerican posters’ ethnic identity and the cultural familiarity of their posts.

		Cultural familiarity			Total
		Neutral	Strong	Weak	
Ethnicity	Italian American	13	29	1	43
	Not Italian American	4	0	0	4
	Unknown	2	0	1	3
Total		19	29	2	50

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

Using the same data provided by the independent coders, the relationship between poster ethnic identity and message valence was examined. Using the examples mentioned above, @italian.queen22 did not indicate that the poster’s avowed Italian American ethnic identity influenced the tone of the post shown. While this post was determined to provide a negative view of Italian American women because of the nudity it contained and the scantily clad woman it featured, nothing in the photo or caption showed how Italian American culture set the tone for the overall post. The post by @saroundtheworld_ showed a couple having fun on Halloween, which is not exclusively an Italian American phenomenon. The post caption did employ the use of the Italian language, but it was not used to set the tone of a post that was clearly not ethnic in nature. The post by @saraintheweeds served to bring awareness of the Feast of the Seven Fishes, but the post was written more to promote another author’s article versus to tell a story from the poster’s family of origin. Finally, the post by @littleitalypodcast demonstrated a relationship between the poster’s Italian American identity and the valence of the post because it included a story from the poster’s family of origin that clearly set the tone for the instructional nature of the post, which called attention to specific Italian observances for All Saints and All Souls Days.

A chi-square test of independence was also performed to examine the relationship between poster ethnic identity and the message valence of their posts as described above. The relationship between these variables was not significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 50) = 9.488, p = 0.148$. The crosstabulation for this research question can be seen in Table 4.

Thus, there is not a relationship between the posters’ ethnic identity and the message valence 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

Table 4: Relationship between the #italianamerican posters’ ethnic identity and the message valence of their posts.

		Valence				Total
		Neutral	Negative	Positive	Very positive	
Ethnicity	Italian American	12	1	12	18	43
	Not Italian American	3	0	0	1	4
	Unknown	3	0	0	0	3
Total		18	1	12	19	50

culture are not exclusive to Italian Americans, even though they make up the majority of users using #italianamerican.

5 Discussion

Social media is a place where users can express themselves freely while meeting people who share similar interests. This study sought to begin a conversation on how cultural identity is expressed on social media and to determine if social media is a new type of ethnic digital neighborhood where users can exchange ideas, meet people from similar backgrounds, and educate users who do not share their same ethnicity. By examining how one culture, in this case, the Italian American culture, avows itself online, it is clear that its ethnic identity transfers to the digital sphere. The use of ethnic-based hashtags, such as #italianamerican, allows for the beginning of an ethnic digital neighborhood, as the hashtags serve to collect posts made by similar-minded individuals that can then open a broader conversation about ethnic culture, highlighting well-known occurrences such as the Feast of the Seven Fishes as well as teaching people about lesser-known topics, such as All Saints and All Souls Day observances. The more strongly a poster identifies with his or her ethnic culture and the more strongly the poster is familiar with that specific culture, the stronger the message his or her post conveys about the culture in question. As also seen in this study, the digital ethnic neighborhood is an inclusive environment where users can engage with a post simply out of curiosity, regardless of ethnic background. Thus, potential cultural beliefs or tendencies have the opportunity to become known by a wider audience, transcending ethnic and cultural boundaries. The selected comments presented for this study also underscore this point, as users were seeking to engage and interact with the original posters, all of whom had something deemed intriguing about Italian American culture. As these digital ethnic neighborhoods are just beginning to be studied, it can be assumed that these communities allow users to strengthen their ethnic ties because they are able to express ideas, meet other people of similar ethnic backgrounds, and discover more about their heritage from trusted sources. In the case of #italianamerican, the digital neighborhood experience was positive. While one ethnic group's experience cannot be fully applied to another, because these digital neighborhoods are filled with people seeking similar experiences, it stands to reason that other ethnic groups will also reap positive benefits from participating in them, even if that participation is minimal.

Even though Italian Americans are not seen as people of color, they still represent a viable ethnic group that is worthy of further study. Oh (2023) pointed out

in a study of #VeryAsian that users employing this hashtag engaged in earnest accounts of their pride in their heritage. Even though the reasons for using #VeryAsian and #italianamerican differ, a similarity can still be found in the original posters' intent to demonstrate the nuances of their respective ethnic cultures on social media. This also goes back to Villa-Nicholas' (2019) discourse on *Latinidad*, where digital memory can be applied to various ethnicities who employ hashtags as a way of showcasing the uniqueness of their respective identities, as well as to King and Fretwell's (2022) study of Asian American influencers who used social media as a way to refute stereotypes and control how their cultures are portrayed online.

In terms of Collier's cultural identity theory, this research demonstrated how a person's cultural identity can vary and how that could play out in the digital sphere. Some users felt that it was okay to tag their posts as #italianamerican even though their posts didn't have anything to do with the ethnicity, while others chose to use the hashtag as a way to educate others about their ethnic culture. Framing theory is also seen in this research because the posts sampled contained various visual clues that could influence how the posts could be interpreted, thus helping to form a discussion on what it might mean to be Italian American in the world of social media.

6 Conclusion, limitations, and suggestions for future study

This study has illustrated how #italianamerican is used on Instagram, providing insight into how ethnicity and cultural familiarity are associated. This study also showed that message valence 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 also showed how digital ethnic neighborhoods allow users of one ethnicity to demonstrate their heritage to users who may not be a part of that culture.

This study was rather limited in scope, as 50 posts is a small sample size. As a result of the small number of cases, the validity of results could be compromised. Further, the low intercoder reliability regarding ethnicity could impact the validity of findings for questions 1 and 3. Additional training for coders could help improve reliability in future studies. 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, as well as a study focusing on the comments and reactions to various ethnic-themed social media posts. An

additional future study could also include a comparative study analyzing hashtag usage for other European American ethnic groups, including Irish Americans, Polish Americans, and German Americans. In terms of an ethnic digital neighborhood, an additional study could focus on how ethnic-themed posts attract followers of similar backgrounds and how these posts work together to tell the digital story of a specific culture. A possible further study could also include examining those who use ethnic-based hashtags to promote various stereotypes against a culture, as there were no examples of anti-Italian posts studied. Finally, a study of the similarities and differences between the experiences of Italian Americans and other ethnic groups on social media would also be a worthwhile additional vein of research.

Appendix A

POST NAMES AND LINKS

Post ID	Post link	Amount of likes
mylifemydrum	N/A	N/A
jenshiner	https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckb03FaLp1f/?img_index=1	18
haveyoucoveredinthekitchen	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbzXrYPc7G/?img_index=1	220
westcoastitalian	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbnJISyT6H/?img_index=1	36
grazianobrothers	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbwKpyMq2u/	8
italians_are_everywhere	https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckbr3EfrvUu/	101
chiaroscuro.tarot	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbozK0urTa/	18
elmwoodparkunico	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkblRiqPHeZ/	26
kffmenterprises	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkblXFFLcod/	10
olliegeorgecooks	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbpkiPyWka/?img_index=1	82
christophersdsm	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbhShhpPMF/	3
sarahintheweeds	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbchObpdzI/	74
chiaraacooks	N/A	N/A
noiafoundation	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbZK2PputR/	8
bettinaholmitaliancitizenship	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbyE3dMkPg/	9
truly_italy	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbWT-_uebh/	23
mikespastaandsandwichshoppe	N/A	N/A
italian.queen22	N/A	N/A
americadomani	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbJ0wasR0_/?img_index=1	32

(continued)

Post ID	Post link	Amount of likes
duchessofcrutches03	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbJc6Eoyt9/?img_index=1	24
italiancitizenshipassistance	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbJIUqLHKR/	32
venetianweymouth	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbHyjJMLYmw/	59
ladolcevitahomesinitaly	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbAnvSpsqW/?img_index=1	16
saroundtheworld_	N/A	N/A
littleitalypodcast	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cka-xjLf3u/	22
littleitalyoflapodcast	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cka-zSWLSfi/	34
niafitalianamerican	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cka6ruOtc6C/	684
niafitalianamerican	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cka-UCvtMb7/	409
scopabriscola	https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckb6fiIO8wz/	411
mastrianos_market	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkazyDyOrYu/	12
howmanystopsleft	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkaxvLtNhAx/?img_index=1	20
lorenzonicidualcitizenship	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkaxjABLqXL/	19
saveellisland	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkawcEUL3tn/	27
ferdinandialtamoda	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkaumwjMPUh/	29
sons_of_italy	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkaucxnOFGZ/	77
my_italian_american_kitchen	N/A	N/A
mangiawithmichele	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkbsttcAgum/	126
feeljoyeveryday	https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckatew9OjxU/	10
ilsange	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkasI3HqV4j/?img_index=1	131
tomandmutz	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkahWKgsNfy/	49
mano_artigiana_di_dante_mortet	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkaaexKpdE/	30
tyler_sorensen	N/A	N/A
scopabriscola	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cka1sX1Ov6F/	11
frankshkg	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkZ3ositGFh/?img_index=1	39
roberta_sparta	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkZ2U-tLMqT/	83
fostered_in_a_box	N/A	N/A
tonymangia	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkZpwU6j1LQ/	80
Ginospdx	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkZq6YuroaZ/?img_index=1	73
janeoffduty249	N/A	N/A
tonymangia	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkZrjX0jiRs/	41

Appendix B

Instagram user account data as of November 12, 2023

Account name	Account type	Total followers
mylifemydrum	Personal (private)	N/A
jenshiner	Personal	733
haveucoveredinthekitchen	Public figure	29,500
westcoastitalian	Business	3,250
grazianobrothers	Business	1,108
italians_are_everywhere	Business	73,800
chiaroscuro.tarot	Business	1,281
elmwoodparkunico	Non-profit organization	577
kffmenterprises	Business	145
olliegeorgecooks	Business	2,751
christophersdsm	Business	698
sarahintheweeds	Public figure	4,017
chiaraaacoos	Personal (private)	N/A
noiafoundation	Non-profit organization	1,203
bettinaholmitaliancitizenship	Business	115
truly_italy	Business	508
mikespastaandsandwichshoppe	Business (Instagram handle no longer in use)	N/A
italian.queen22	Personal (private)	N/A
americadomani	Business	7,017
duchessofcrutches03	Personal	428
italiancitizenshipassistance	Business	1,930
venetianweymouth	Business	2,910
ladolcevithomesinitaly	Business	685
saroundtheworld_	Personal (private)	N/A
littleitalypodcast	Business	981
littleitalyoflapodcast	Business	651
niafitalianamerican	Non-profit organization	43,200
niafitalianamerican	Non-profit organization	43,200
scopabriscola	Business	10,300
mastrianos_market	Business	1,030
howmanystopsleft	Personal	1,886
lorenzoni dualcitizenship	Business	1,049
saveellisland	Non-profit organization	3,124
ferdinandaltamoda	Personal	1,813
sons_of_italy	Non-profit organization	10,700
my_italian_american_kitchen	Personal (private)	N/A
mangiawithmichele	Business	32,500
feeljoyeveryday	Business	343
ilsange	Personal	2,166
tomandmutz	Business	21,500

(continued)

Account name	Account type	Total followers
mano_artigiana_di_dante_mortet	Business	1,668
tyler_sorensen	Personal (private)	N/A
scopabriscola	Business	10,300
frankshkg	Business	3,196
roberta_sparta	Public figure	15,200
fostered_in_a_box	Personal (private)	N/A
tonymangia	Public figure	22,500
ginospdx	Business	1,310
janeoffduty249	Personal (private)	N/A
tonymangia	Public figure	22,500

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