“You Guys are *Gavones*, Dude!”: @theragingitalian and Social Media Identity Subversion

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Introduction

As a fifth-generation Italian American, my cultural connection to the “motherland” is tenuous. My Italian starts and ends with *ciao*, and my sole trip to Italy was a touristic experience wholly deprived of romanticized connection with distant relatives: all of them live in the Tri-State Area. In every regard, I am American. And to some, my hyphenated ethnic label may appear superfluous or desperate, and they may abandon the “[insert European]-American” format for the simple, skin color-based label of “white.” However, I still use that first title. Sure, those core behaviors and social links may be lacking, but I do feel unique under the white classification. I grew up eating prosciutto, spaghetti, and clams, and with the tantalizing smell of sauce wafting through my house on Sundays. I talk with my hands whether emotionally neutral or agitated. My Mom is so Italian, she married an Irishman! These at first appear like surface level differences, but hint towards a slightly different history in America, a history which has translated into slightly different values from the hopelessly vague “white” population. And it is in those differences that Italians have been historically ostracized. Today, they may still be economic beneficiaries of whiteness – a concept which will be thoroughly analyzed soon – but there is a distinct characteristic of uniqueness, and of more dubious effect, stereotype that exerts influence on Italian American culture. That is what makes studying Italian American audiovisual media depictions so intriguing: and for my purposes, specifically the ethnocentric social media ecosystem generated by and for the community.

Italian American TikTok creators often employ stereotypes in their ethnic-based content under the guise of “relatability” or “comedy.” In this paper, using constructivist theory, I aim to argue that this reflects the partiality of Italian American assimilation into whiteness, and the subversion of that identity in their applying traditionally negative stereotypes in said content. I will first go into the theoretical backings behind the lens I am applying, then use it to interpret American whiteness. From there, I will examine the conversation around the historical depictions of Italian Americans in TV and film, along with some minor socioeconomic context. Using @theragingitalian – a TikTok account following a teenage boy as he angers his temperamental Italian American father – I plan to analyze three of the account’s short-form videos and one podcast clip with the aforementioned creator from @growingupitalian for their Italian cultural signifiers and identity-building effect. Finally, I will extend my conclusions into

their implications for American identity formation more broadly: a delegitimization of a racial America, opting for an ethnicity-based approach to account for interracial uniqueness.

Theoretical Frameworks

As I researched the processes of Italian American identity formation through audiovisual media, I applied ethnic constructivist theory for its insights into what drives differentiation between and resonation with a certain label over another. Constructivism in ethnic studies is premised on a fluid, dynamic, and often self-reinforcing process of identity formation. Identities are not "static," (Fittante, 2019, 814) in that the in-traits can never be paused or preserved in some original state. Societal change precipitates reorientations in group identities, and as society is constantly shifting in its makeup (wealth, ethnicity, gender, religion) and norms (voting rights, respectability of occupations, romantic standards, etc.), identities correspondingly co-evolve in a never-ending process. Identity actualization is often heavily steeped in politics, where Fittante (2019) proposes a three-step guide for ethnic mobilization:

1. Attribute replacement (changing traits to pass in society).
2. Change in the salience of community issues (prioritizing certain unifying positions).
3. Attribute recombination (choosing to build an "in" around certain qualities).

Notice the exclusionary language riddled throughout: building an "in," (811) changing traits, and prioritizing unifying positions all construct another identity, the "other." Hopf (1998) succinctly declared "every self is incomplete without the other," (184) as knowing what one is not is just as integral as knowing what one is. Further, that first step alludes to the trade-offs a group makes to enhance its social standing relative to other groups. This concept of adapting for prosperity's sake is acutely relevant in observing the expansion of whiteness in America.

Simply put, American whiteness equals power. It is the power that emanates from being in the majority, representing an individual over a group, expecting to be included in *all* spaces, and occasionally resorting to spontaneous, unprosecuted "'terror'" (Clarke and Garner, 2010, 19) to intimidate those who do not belong. However, as opposed to the monolithic image of whiteness conjured by that opening sentence, a school of constructivist scholars posits any form of perceived majority as impossibly false. Chandra (2024) asserts "every majority that is now being mobilized in the name of nationalism is but a census category that assigns a common name to a conglomeration of minorities," (47) directing attention towards the contextual undertones which drive identity differentiation and narrative-molding power of government policy in positioning said processes. For example, Clarke and Garner (2010) illustrate the increase of the "white" population in Puerto Rico from the 1910 Census (65.5%) to the 1920 Census (73%) as not due to a spike in birth rate, but the conscious recasting of "white" under the Caribbean lens:

a degree of non-European ancestry was now passable, over the American hypodescent standard (16-17). Impersonal actors heavily influence the identity forging process.

In America, Karimi and Wilkes (2021) hypothesize a boundary model of whiteness, where "white" Anglo-Saxons assimilated European immigrants under the appellation after recognizing intergroup interactions. Rapid societal change from the 1880s-1940s like "the diminishing impact of religious schisms," (198) a European tendency to politically and professionally organize, and a legal system generalizing Europeans as white over black altered "white" attitudes until they broadened the definition of whiteness to be background-based. By the 1940s, the Census changed its question on color (skin-tone) to race (nebulous concept without the color gradient system), planting Europeans firmly in the white camp (Luconi, 2021). In the case of Italians, Luconi (2021) qualifies extension of whiteness by adding a regional perspective: in the South, where Italian immigrants fraternized and worked with black Americans, Italian whiteness took longer to establish. Contrastingly, Californian Italians' active role in Sinophobic campaigns ingrained their whiteness quickly. An "inbetween people," (Clarke and Garner 2010, 30) midwestern and northern urban Italians were geographically "othered" in crime-riddled, poor ethnic ghettos. Out of every region, those settings would ultimately draw the attention of Hollywood.

Historical Context in the Audiovisual Media Industry

Interwar America was both profusely xenophobic – epitomized by immigration quotas instituted in both 1921 and 1924 – and home to a burgeoning film industry. Italian Americans, with their non-white status, became an often covered topic of the era's movies; Little Italies were swept up in the crime surge following Prohibition in 1919 and then the Great Depression, with Italian mafiosos like Al Capone and Charles "Lucky" Luciano becoming formidable fixtures of the public imagination (Cortés, 1987; Cavallero, 2004). Anti-foreign aversion, fascination with mafia crime, and preconceived notions of Italian men as naturally violent (stemming from Italian anarcho-terrorism in the early 20th century) coalesced in film.

Cavallero (2004) establishes two Italian American depictions I would like to touch on: the gangster and *fesso*. Films like *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface, Shame of the Nation* (1932) follow Rico Bandello and Tony Camonte respectively as the two emotionally and physically violent criminals terrorize their ethnic communities. Italian American antagonists are lent no background on their descent into the illegal underworld, made evident juxtaposed to 1931's *The Public Enemy, where* Irish gangster Tommy Powers' story begins at birth and his horrendous family life that led him into crime. Other films like the first two (*Night Ride* [1931], *Blue Orchid* [1940], etc.) similarly portray rapacious, thuggish Italian men. Secondly, the *fesso* (fool) was the

flamboyant, broken-English-speaking Italian meant for audience amusement. Though variations of this trope could be seen as late as Joey Tribbiani in *Friends* (1994-2004), it largely died out with the end of recent mass Italian migration to the U.S. (Cavallero, 2004). Evidently, interwar America's primary concerns surrounding poverty, crime, and foreign infiltration positioned newly-arrived, largely impoverished Italians as a group worthy of ostracization.

Post-WWII, poverty and crime lost their front-and-center spot in public minds. Riding more liberal racial attitudes and the race question change on the Census, Italian Americans began to receive slightly more humanistic audiovisual media portrayals: the violent and ignorant Italian trope persisted, though less conspicuous. There was an emphasis on potential for assimilation, with *That Midnight Kiss* (1949) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) both following an Italian American's quest to win over a white woman and escape his burdensome family (Szczepanski, 1979). *The Young Savages* (1961), a tale of the murder trial of Italian American teens who killed a Puerto Rican boy, extended the gratitude of realism to its Italian subjects by evoking their troubled pasts as the ethos for the crime (Cortés, 1987).

Yet the impact of these former works pales in comparison to the seminal *The Godfather* (1972). Another story of Italian gangsterism gripped audiences, only this time, directed by Italian American Francis Ford Coppola; cultural details like spaghetti cooking instructions and the opening scene of an extravagant Sicilian wedding began a trend of Italian creatives legitimizing stereotypes with their innate knowledge (Szczepanski, 1979). @theragingitalian is a more democratized, low-effort iteration of this trend. Fascinatingly, whereas Fittante (2019) posed ethnic identity mobilization as originating from within the community, this audiovisual media variation represents the self-reinforcing of an identity imposed by an outside force (non-Italian directors from the 1920s-1960s). This is a notable caveat, potentially stemming from the profit goal of this identity construction compared to the civic engagement goal of Fittante's (2019).

By the 1970s, an Italian American class of white-collar workers began to develop after several generations in the U.S. Lawyer Jimmy Berlutti in *The Practice* (1997-2004) and presidential campaign director Bruno Gianelli in *The West Wing* (1999-2006) reflected this societal shift from near the economic bottom to top. Italians were increasingly seen as white, and even as the gangster archetype persisted, a more nuanced picture was painted. Take *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), with mobster Tony and family living in an affluent New Jersey suburb as he balances his criminality with middle class living (Cavallero, 2004). An old archetype was adapting to more seamless, "normal" perceptions of Italianness. Contemporary Italian American-centered audiovisual media like *The Jersey Shore* (2009-2012) have placed less focus on ethnicity and more on common American traits like materialism and consumerism (Troyani, 2013). As we shall see, the work done over the last three decades of movies and TV to lessen that quality of Italian otherness is being reversed on social media: the most recent and understudied audiovisual

media variation in terms of ethnic identity formation. Only Longo (2023) has examined Italian American online community sentiments: through a 110-person survey of self-identified Italian Americans, all placed an emphasis on their cultural heritage, leading them to seek out Italian American-geared content online. Around half further claimed to have been partly socialized in Italian culture through social media. An excellent piece, Longo's (2023) work should be the catalyst for more research, not the end.

Artifacts #1-3: @theragingitalian

@theragingitalian is a TikTok account with 1.3 million followers and 43.8 million likes at the time of writing. Run by the son of a Bronx Italian man who freaks out at slight instigating, as a piece of popular culture, it is an excellent example of contemporary ethnic-geared comedy for its explicit Italian branding and in-group references (TheRagingItalian, n.d.). Of the hundreds of videos under the account and hosting the creator, I chose four for their unique inclusions of Italian American culture and employment of the formerly discussed stereotypes of aggressive Italians. This creator's continuation of what Coppola started maintains a connection to non-whiteness for Italian Americans molded to new communications technologies.

The first video follows the son as he engages in the "daf*q" trend of punctuating every sentence with "daf*q" to anger people. As he repeats "daf*q" time after time, his father yells back at him, asking "what the f*ck are you saying at the end of the sentence?" (TheRagingItalian, 2024a, 0:21). The Dad is wearing a red-and-white New York Giants jersey, a nice watch, the setting is a cluttered house, and the Dad persists in frantic hand motions.

The second video follows the son as he engages in the "lower your tone" prank on his Dad as the son eats prosciutto. His Dad erupts, saying "you guys are *gavones* dude," (TheRagingItalian, 2025, 0:07) and firing off expletives at his back-talking son. Upon his other son coming downstairs – "I've got a class upstairs and you're yelling," (1:04) - the Dad retorts with "I don't give a sh*t!" (1:08). Focus is on what the son is eating, the Dad's gesticulations, the Italian word interspersed among English, and one comment: "Tell him to drop the accent. 😭 " from furyofthephoenix (furyofthephoenix, 2025).

The third video follows the duo to the Bronx, an old ethnic ghetto, to buy Italian pastas, cheeses, and breads. "Muzadel," "manigot," and "fugget about it," (TheRagingItalian, 2024b, 0:03; 0:27; 0:45) all make an appearance. A couple details to note: the trip from Connecticut (their home state) to New York, the way traditional delicacies are pronounced, the Dad's hand movements, the welcoming atmosphere of Arthur Street, and one comment: "He should of been a cast member of the sopranos haha ❤️ 😂" from *Meia* 🖤 (*Meia* 🖤, 2024).

Artifact #4: @theragingitalian

The fourth video is more self-aware: a clip from the podcast *Growing Up Italian* with the creator of @theragingitalian and his father. It is a known vehicle for Italian American internet celebrities to talk with the hosts about their connections to the culture. After being asked about "what made you go that route, like with the Italian?" @theragingitalian remarks "Italians are kind of known for being more loud" (Loguercio and Curcio, 2024, 0:07-0:22). Notice the Italian flag painted on the wall, his father's saying "it was to save money back in the day" (0:44) upon being asked why he fixed his own cars, and one comment: "This reminds me [of] Tony Soprano when he's pissed, just like my dad lol" from King_Goomba (King_Goomba, 2024).

Artifact Analysis

Culturally and historically, a distinct rebuking of Italian whiteness emerges in the designated clips. The loud, violent, temperamental Italian conjured by films like *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface, Shame of the Nation* (1932) is no longer completely used to shame, but a tool to bring together the community it targets. @theragingitalian appears at first to be nothing more than an Italian profiting off decades of misrepresentation – "Italians are kind of known for being more loud," (Loguercio and Curcio, 2024, 0:07-0:22) – and though this may be true of the account creator, the father, the subject of the videos, spins a narrative of Italian Americanness tracking socioeconomic progress and a lingering connection to a country left behind. Beginning with his anecdote about fixing his own cars in the Bronx ghetto, success seems like something gradually obtained; through hard work, he moved to the Connecticut suburbs, where his sons were raised. However, Italianness never escapes him. With that newfound wealth, cultural specialties like prosciutto, artisan "muzadel," (TheRagingItalian, 2024b, 0:03) and pasta are purchased during annual visits back to that ethnic neighborhood, while a cushy, excessive lifestyle has emerged epitomized by the cluttered house, the flashy watch, and an exclusive colorway Giants jersey. "*Gavones*," (TheRagingItalian, 2025, 0:07) "fugget about it," (TheRagingItalian, 2024b, 0:45) and his persistent gesticulations point towards an Italian-specific means of communication: words of old are sprinkled in the new language, and gestures devised in Italy to bridge gaps between unintelligible dialects have morphed into personifications of emotion (Rotella, 2024). A harsh intolerance for disrespect from his son – the primary reason behind his outbursts – alludes to a past where respect was not taken for granted, but clawingly earned.

Such narrative construction does not only follow the real socio-historical story of Italian Americans: the Dad is where commenters bond over shared experiences of an angry Italian

father. As one commenter under the podcast clip phrased it, "...just like my dad lol" (King_Goomba, 2024). What sets apart Italian American social media creators like @theragingitalian is their ability to actively keep these memories alive and continuously build upon those experiences to spark conversations. With that in mind, there is still an element of mocking – "...drop the accent. 😭," "He should of been a cast member of the sopranos haha ❤️ 😂," – though even this can be viewed as the digital othering of Italian Americans (furyofthephoenix, 2025; *Meia* 🖤, 2024). Whether resonating with or hating on @theragingitalian, users are sustaining an interpretation of the ethnicity as different in one form or another.

Unlike social media, movies and TV no longer comment once the last minute plays or the finale airs: digital communications platforms infinitely evolve and are able to add in a layer of complexity from the sheer volume of minutes posted. In this case, four videos uploaded weeks apart when cobbled together all separately invoked a unique Italian identity in some way. Assimilation into the majority is effectively countered by this perpetual reminding of one's specialness in society, particularly after the grand downsizing of physical Italian enclaves since around the 1970s (Cavallero, 2004). Longo (2023) described such digital community shaping phenomenon as a "'neighborhood' unto itself," (27) where old connections lost to suburbanization or immigration can be regained through websites. More than any other audiovisual media mode, social media impacts identity formulation, constructing a perceived self which is more atomized and self-reinforcing than ever before. Within the antiquated stereotypes employed by @theragingitalian is a statement: this is different, unlike the rest, and Italians are special because of it.

Conclusion

Social media will be the blossoming of constructivist identities in a way unparalleled throughout history. The myriad subcultures that dominate websites like TikTok go beyond imagination, promoting a micro view of society impossible without the idea-generating capacity of the internet. In this essay, I hypothesize @theragingitalian's content is a part of de-whitening of Italian Americans, influencing them to see themselves as unique despite their gradual acceptance into whiteness. Short videos like the four analyzed above may be effortlessly forgotten if seen once: it is the volume of their creation and vigor of the like-tracking algorithm which doubles down the message of apartness argued here. Though many viewers still laugh at a stereotypically boisterous Italian father, @theragingitalian has fostered a community around itself for those who find comfort in a familiar family dynamic. @growingupitalian brings together the aforementioned creator and other Italian American celebrities in a culture-specific forum. Though the Italian social media sphere is especially developed, ethnic-geared content is

a genre poised to increase in influence as more users log onto platforms. Conceivably, social media exposure could be the basis for deconstructing a racial view of America in favor of an ethnic alternative – not white or Asian, but German, Italian, Irish, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, etc. – in accordance with how citizens actually view themselves.

This essay has one major limitation: it exclusively covers male stereotypes and creators. Future research could expand upon the female dimension, as well as apply the same logic of social media's role in identity formation to other ethnic e-communities. It is a topic that is very promising if slightly nebulous in tracking impact, and there is a significant gap, particularly for TikTok. The platform's meteoric rise to prominence necessitates in-depth analysis on its impact on American society. Furthermore, examining continuity in representation from film and TV onto social media is another fascinating direction to take. Ultimately, the ramifications of digital activities should receive increased attention from sociological and audiovisual media scholars. It is a growing – and majorly relevant – course of study.

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