eEthnicity: Social media, Italian Americans, and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This study seeks to determine the relationship between social media and various generations of the Italian American community. It also aims to understand if various types of social media posts affect Italian Americans differently depending on their age. Presenting social media as a new host culture for Italian Americans where their ethnic identity serves as their primary point of reference as they navigate the digital world, this study also attempts to determine exactly how effective social media can be seen as a tool for discovering and learning more about one's ethnic heritage. This study was performed via a quantitative survey of 110 respondents, with certain results analyzed via both chi-square tests of independence and Pearson correlation coefficients. Study outcomes assert that an individual's self-concept is built on cultural, social, and personal identities, with all three working together to form a person's overall identity. Survey respondents showed a strong cultural tie to their Italian American heritage that affected their personal identity to the point where they felt it was necessary to seek out Italian American-related content on social media. By participating in Italian American social media sites as either a fan or consumer of content, the respondents showed a social identity in which their cultural and personal identities play a defining role. The respondents' cultural identity was used as the social context within which they operate, showing that it does influence how they interact with social media content.

Keywords: social media, Italian American, ethnicity, intercultural communication competence, symbolic interactionism

1. Introduction

Ethnicity is in the eye of the beholder. For as many Americans who claim origin from another ethnic group, there are just as many manifestations of that ethnicity in how they think, what they believe, and how they live their lives. Italian Americans are no exception to this belief.

The Italian American community is the fourth-largest ethnic group in the United States, with more than 15.7 million people claiming Italian ancestry (Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America, 2003). Characterized by a strong tie to their culture of origin, Italian Americans can often cite family folklore and recipes just as easily as they can tell someone their own name. Despite being in the United States as a community for nearly 150 years, many Italian Americans still proudly identify with their ethnic origins.

While many of today's Italian Americans are more assimilated into American culture due to their ancestors arriving during the great wave of immigration from the late 1800s to the early 1900s (Grieco, 2014), they still seek out avenues to discover and engage with their ethnic heritage. Italian American organizations, newspapers, magazines, and web and social media sites are all ways through which they can learn more about their culture of origin. There has yet to be a study published on Italian American social media preferences, even though similar studies have been undertaken for the African American and Latino communities (Krogstad, 2015).

This study seeks to determine the relationship between social media and various generations of the Italian American community, in order to understand how they engage with social media. Grounding research in intercultural communication competence and symbolic interactionism, this study presents social media as a new host culture for Italian Americans. In this digital host culture, Italian Americans' ethnic identity serves as their primary point of reference to determine how effective social media can be as a tool for discovering and learning more about one's ethnic heritage.

This study will use Lustig and Koester's intercultural communication competence framework, which stresses that an individual's self-concept is built on cultural, social, and personal identities, with all three working together to form a person's overall identity (Lustig & Koester, 2006, p. 137). Lustig and Koester's definition of cultural identity refers to one's sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group and is formed by a process that results from membership in a particular culture (p. 137). Discovering one's cultural identity also involves learning about and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture (Lustig & Koester, p. 137). A social group inherently contains its own set of traditions, its own heritage, thinking patterns, structures, and so on (Lustig & Koester, p. 137).

Lustig and Koester (p. 138) describe social identity as something that develops because of membership in particular groups within one's culture, with the characteristics and concerns common to most members of such social groups shaping the way individuals view their characteristics. For Lustig and Koester, those who emphasize the group to which they identify socially feel as if they "belong" to "their" group (p. 138). Lustig and Koester define personal identity as being based on people's unique characteristics, which may differ from those of others in their cultural and social groups (p. 138). Lustig and Koester also stress that people's social identities will inevitably be linked to the preferences shaped by their cultural identities; therefore, there is no escaping from the culture or ethnicity to which one belongs (p. 139).

According to Chen et al. (2019), symbolic interactionism theory proposes that how a person responds to an object can be explained by his or her interpreted symbolic meanings

towards it in any given social context; therefore different types of technological innovations may represent different meanings to users across different social contexts and for different purposes. Applying a person's cultural identity as the social context in which they operate, ethnic-based social media postings can take on a different meaning depending on how strongly a person identifies with his or her ethnic heritage. Chen et al.'s (2019) findings confirm that the symbolic meaning of social media elicited by both technical and social cues could be characterized into two categories: first, as a tool for social-relationship building and personal-image building when technical features supporting interpersonal interactions are provided and social connections are strong and close; and, second, as a tool for selling, branding, and advertising when technical features supporting information broadcasting are provided and social connections are weak and distant. To Chen et al. (2019), symbolic interactionism highlights the relationships between the symbolic meanings of objects and people's responses to those objects.

According to Laor (2022), symbolic interactionism theory examines the relationships of individuals within society through various representations, such as communication, behavior, and dress, which, when combined, demonstrate how individuals reason through and shape their world. Symbolic interactionism focuses on individuals' daily social interactions and how they give meaning and create order (Laor, 2022). "Meaning" is assigned through interactions involving members of various groups, and nothing has a set meaning; rather, serve as interpreters of reality, and they respond to the way they perceive it (Laor, 2022). Laor (2022) explained that one of the basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism theory is that people spend most of their lives as members of groups and organizations and that, as members of these groups, they play very specific roles based on other group members' expectations. Individuals' behaviors can be predicted if we have information on the roles they are expected to play, and the role a person plays affects not only their behavior but also their beliefs and values (Laor, 2022). Laor's (2022) findings highlight social media's role as an additional space where a group manages its symbolic interaction. Social media as a space can be used to communicate with diverse groups and with networks that may assist them in further conveying their messages (Laor, 2022). For this study, these additional spaces created by social media are a new kind of host culture in which Italian Americans operate.

Ethnicity and how it is expressed on social media is still a developing field in communications, especially regarding European American ethnic groups. Krase (2006) studied how the Italian American character, or version of Italianness (*Italianità*), of four of New York City's most well-known Little Italies (Mulberry Street and East Harlem in Manhattan, Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, Belmont, Bronx) has been affected by the arrival of new and different ethnic groups. Little Italies continue to be important places to study because they are not only venues for assimilation and acculturation but also because they help us to understand America's ethnic past, present, and future (Krase, 2006).

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.

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.

According to Dekker et al. (2015), some studies suggest that social media encourages contact between people of the same ethnicity by removing community social and spatial boundaries while offering new spaces for communication and redefinition of ethnic identities, while other studies contend that social media adds an online dimension to bonding among members of the same ethnic group, either within the ethnic community or transnationally. Dekker et al. (2015) aim to understand these mixed findings by attempting to determine under what circumstances social media facilitates bridging and bonding behaviors. To this end, Dekker et al. (2015) conducted 52 semi-structured interviews with second-generation migrant youth in Rotterdam to inquire about their motivations and considerations concerning social media use. Results showed that social media offer a new space for different orientations of contact among members of the same ethnic group (Dekker et al., 2015). The authors added that this type of contact is rarely deliberately pursued online, but it is often constituted in venues organized around common interests (Dekker et al., 2015). Engagement in these types of online communities is motivated by struggles with identity and lifestyle (Dekker et al., 2015).

In an attempt to see how Tibetans living and traveling through Xining City (China) practed and performed their ethnic identity in the face of perceived harassment, Grant (2017) analyzed posts that they shared over WeChat in 2013 and 2014. Grant (2017) discovered that the Tibetans created a cyber-based community that contributed to their ethnic group formation. According to Grant (2017), social media changes how Tibetan ethnicity is represented, which affects how members participate in their ethnic group.

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.

Society's ever-increasing digitalization affects intercultural communication because the digital world has opened society to more frequent interactions with people from differing cultures. New and developing technologies have changed how people form groups and how they interact and exist within them (Baltezarevic et al., 2019). Communication within a virtual community provides new opportunities for interaction, which assists with the development of new social relations. Baltezarevic et al. (2019) wrote that in a virtual community, users can interact, exchange ideas, share information, provide social support, do business, direct activities, create art, play games, participate in a political debate, etc., all of which indicate the formation of a culture. This is directly opposed to the processes of maintaining a traditional linear culture and the values it represents (Baltezarevic et al., 2019). Digital media and modern technologies seem to prevail and suppress traditional cultural values and their content, while new technological inventions and the corresponding media stemming from them have become the means of modern identity transformation (Baltezarevic et al., 2019).

According to Belorussova et al. (2020), having become an essential part of everyday life and a symbol of the modern lifestyle, the Internet transmits and shapes the dynamics of sociocultural changes. The authors claim that the hashtag has become a way of outwardly proclaiming one's ethnic identity, and that ethnic communities who wish to maintain their unity and to develop a new way of communication within its members are turning towards hashtags as a way to refine the definition of self versus other. For ethnicity, the hashtag is, on the one hand, a means of communication and maintaining the vitality of a community and, on the other, an instrument of defending its distinctive character and competition with other groups (Belorussova et al., 2020). A community shaped by a hashtag has its own rules and traditions, interests and preferences, and strong and weak points, affecting, at the same time, the dynamics of ethnicity both on and offline (Belorussova et al., 2020).

Bozkurt et al. (2021) found that ethnicity is an important force behind consumers' intent to comment on firm-based social media posts. Specifically, compared to ethnic majority (i.e., Caucasian) consumers, ethnic minority (i.e., African American) consumers are more likely to comment on a social media post when most of the post's existing comments are made by ethnically similar consumers, owing to their perceived similarity to existing commenters (Bozkurt et al., 2021). Also, consumers' ethnic identity, social media usage intensity level, and shared content associations play an important role in social media interaction (Bozkurt et al., 2021).

Radwan (2022) believes that social media's effect on cultural identity is a matter of constant concern. In a study of 360 people living in the rura village of Bamha, Egypt, two-fifths of the respondents (40%) demonstrated that the level of change in cultural identity was high in relation to their use of social media (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 adding that it is impossible to avoid mentioning individual cultural experiences when analyzing their behavior on social media.

Finally, 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.

2. Methods

After conducting the literature review for this study, it became clear that there was a lack of studies describing how Italian Americans perceive their personal ethnic identity online through social media usage, if there are potential generational differences at play in their social media usage, and what type of social media posts are most pertinent to them. Previous studies focused on social media-based actions, such as commenting on posts or joining virtual neighborhoods, or on how the user navigates the social media world instead of on if a person's ethnic identity and the generation to which they belong affect how they participate in these digital environments. Ethnic identity is a highly personal experience and varies from person to person; thus, a person's ethnic identity can serve as the lens through which they see the world as presented to them via social media.

This study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Do generational differences play a role in how people who claim Italian American ethnicity perceive their heritage as it is represented on social media?

RQ2: What is the nature of the relationship between social media post efficacy and different generations of Italian Americans?

To answer these questions, 110 people who claim Italian American ancestry were surveyed anonymously. The survey was available online from November 15-25, 2022, following an Institutional Research Board's (IRB) approval of a Human Subjects Review Application on November 14, 2022. Links to this survey were posted on the researcher's personal social media sites, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. It was also sent to and published by various Italian American organizations, including the Italian Sons and Daughters of America, the National Italian American Foundation, the Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America, the Columbus Citizens Foundation, UNICO National, the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles, and the Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations, as well as We the Italians, a major Italian American news outlet.

The survey provided to participants is included as an appendix at the end of this article.

3. Results

3.1. Generational Breakdown

Figure 1 demonstrates the age breakdown for respondents who answered the questions that were deemed most pertinent to this study, which included "What have been the most effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?", "What are the least effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?", and "What other types of social media posts would you like to see more of regarding your Italian American heritage?" Respondents were described as members of the Baby Boomer generation, Generation X, Millennials, or Generation Z based on the criteria presented by the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2022). Traditionally, anyone aged 55-73 would be labeled as Baby Boomers, while Generation X would be labeled as age 39-54. Those aged 23-38 would be labeled as Millennials, and respondents aged 22 and younger would be labeled as Generation Z (Dimock, 2022). Because of the overlapping of generations due to the age brackets presented to respondents, those who answered that they were age 60 or older in the survey were labeled as "Baby Boomers," while those whose ages range from 41-59 years old were labeled as "Generation X." Respondents aged 30-40 were labeled as "Millennials," and respondents up to age 29 were labeled as "Generation Z."
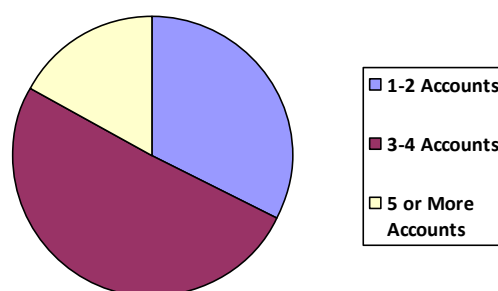
Figure 1: Generation breakdown of survey respondents
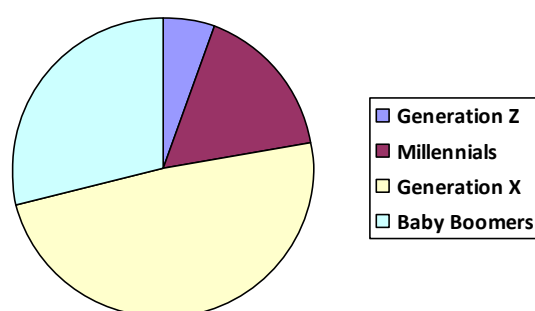
3.2. Social Media Accounts and Usage

As seen in Figure 2, most survey respondents have 3-4 social media accounts. This is lower than the 2021 nationwide average of 6.6 social media platforms per user (Dean, 2021).

Figure 2: Amount of respondent social media accounts

Survey respondents were also given the chance to answer which social media platform was their favorite; members of Generation Z and Millennials ranked Instagram as their favorite social media platform, while members of Generation X and Baby Boomers surveyed ranked Facebook as their favorite social media platform. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between preferred social media sites and generational differences among Italian Americans. The relationship between these variables was significant, X_2 (20, N = 89) = 49.332, p = <.001. The full results of the chi-square test of independence are presented below:

Summary

	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Age * Site	89	100.0%	0	0.0%	89	100.0%

Age * Site Crosstabulation

		Site					Total
		Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube	
Age	21-29 years old	1	2	1	0	0	4
	30-39 years old	7	8	0	0	0	15
	40-49 years old	11	9	1	3	0	24
	50-59 years old	10	6	0	1	2	19
	Older than 60 years old	21	2	0	0	3	26
	Younger than 20 years old	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Total	50	27	2	5	5	89

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	49.332[a]	20	.000
Likelihood Ratio	38.392	20	.008
N of Valid Cases	89		

a. 23 cells (76.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .02.

3.3. Italian American Ethnicity

The questions and responses presented in this section pertain to basic ethnic demographic information regarding respondents. Most survey respondents claim more than half Italian American ethnicity, as shown in Figure 3. Respondents were allowed to elaborate on whether or not their heritage comes from their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents, with most respondents claiming more than one generation of Italian heritage.

Figure 3: Percentage of Italian American ancestry of respondents
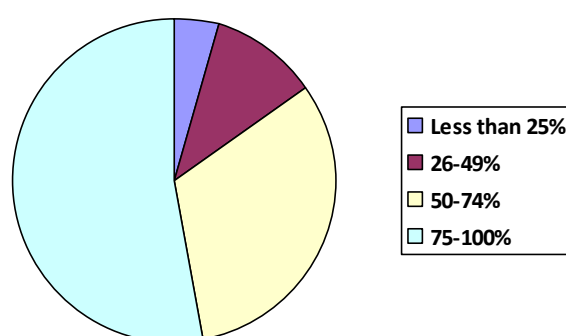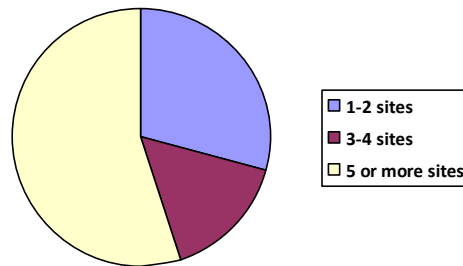

3.4. Italian Americans and Social Media

This section focuses on questions regarding how respondents interact with their ethnicity on social media, including how it is perceived. Figure 4 shows how many Italian

American-specific social media profiles respondents follow, which could include media outlets, influencers, organizations, or other profiles.

Figure 4: Amount of Italian American social media profiles followed by respondents

As seen in Figure 4, most survey respondents follow five or more social media sites about their Italian American heritage, which suggests a desire to interact with other Italian Americans as well as to discover more about their culture via digital means.

Figure 5 shows that more respondents feel they learned more about their Italian American ethnicity through their family of origin; however, the social media statistics are telling because they show that digital media does provide an educational atmosphere for people to discover more about their ethnic origins that can be used in tandem with what is learned at home.

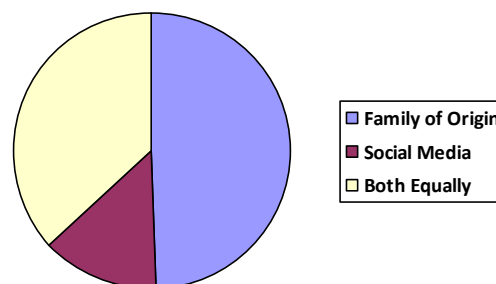*Figure 5: How respondents learned about their Italian American ethnicity*

Figure 6 demonstrates that most survey respondents claim that social media has changed their perception of their Italian American ethnicity in a positive way. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between respondents' generations and their perception of their ethnicity based on social media, which showed an insignificant correlation between the two variables, r(69) = -.143, p = .240. This means that age does not have an overall effect on how various generations of Italian Americans perceive their ethnicity based on social media, and that social media does not have a bearing on how Italian Americans see themselves as belonging to their ethnic group. The full results of the Pearson correlation coefficient are below.

Correlations

		Perception	Age
Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.143
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.240
	N	76	69
Age	Pearson Correlation	.143	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.240	
	N	69	76

Confidence Intervals

	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Intervals (2- tailed)[a]	
			Lower	Upper
Perception - Age	.143	.240	-.097	.368

a. Estimation is based on Fisher's r-to-z transformation.

Figure 6: Social media and perception of Italian American ethnicity

Legend:
- Very Positive
- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative
- Very Negative
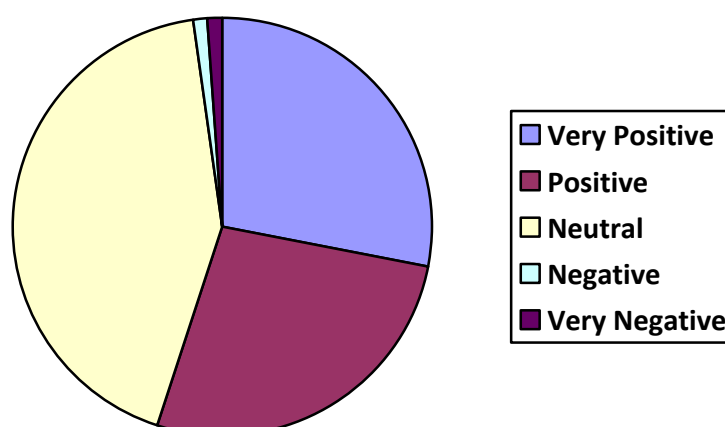
Finally, users were asked if social media can be considered a valid tool for promoting ethnic culture, with 89% of respondents saying it is.

3.5. Social Media Post Efficacy and Italian Americans

Respondents were divided into generational categories for the following questions, "What have been the most effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?", "What are the least effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?", and "What other types of social media posts would you like to see more of regarding your Italian American heritage?"

3.5.1. What have been the most effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between what Italian Americans considered the most effective social media posts about their ethnicity and their age group. The relationship between these variables was insignificant, X_2 (15, N = 89) = 20.991, p = .137. Photos with captions were labeled by all generations as the most effective type of social media posts for them to learn more about their heritage. The full results are presented below.

Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
19. What have been the most effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media? (Choose all that apply) * 22. What is your age group?	89	80.2%	22	19.8%	111	100.0%

19. What have been the most effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media? (Choose all that

apply) * 22. What is your age group? Crosstabulation

Count

		22. What is your age group?				
		2	3	4	5	Total
19. What have been the most effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media (Choose all that apply)		0	0	0	1	1
	Long Video	0	5	3	4	12
	Photo with Caption	3	5	16	11	35
	Short Video	1	4	10	2	17
	Text	1	0	1	1	3
	Referral to Website	0	1	13	7	21
Total		5	15	43	26	89

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	20.991[a]	15	.137
Likelihood Ratio	21.239	15	.129
N of Valid Cases	89		

a. 17 cells (70.8%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .06.

3.5.2. What have been the least effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between what Italian Americans considered the least effective social media posts pertaining to their ethnicity and their age group. The relationship between these variables was significant, X_2 (15, N = 89) = 32.719, p = .005. The full results of the chi-square test of independence are presented below.

Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
20. What are the least effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media? (Choose all that apply) * 22. What is your age group?	89	80.2%	22	19.8%	111	100.0%

20. What are the least effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media? (Choose all that apply) * 22.

What is your age group? Crosstabulation

Count

		22. What is your age group?				Total
		2	3	4	5	
20. What are the least effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media? (Choose all that apply)		0	0	0	4	4
	Long Video	4	2	17	8	31
	Photo with Caption	0	1	6	3	10
	Short Video	1	0	1	0	2
	Text	0	8	12	10	30
	Referral to website	0	4	7	1	12
Total		5	15	43	26	89

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	32.719[a]	15	.005
Likelihood Ratio	32.166	15	.006
N of Valid Cases	89		

a. 17 cells (70.8%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .11.

The results of the chi-square test show that there was a generational disparity in terms of what the least effective type of social media post was for them to discover more about their heritage. Both Generation X and Generation Z found longer-form videos lasting five minutes or more to be least effective, while Millennials and Baby Boomers felt that short, text-based posts without images were least effective.

3.5.3. What other types of social media posts would you like to see more of regarding your Italian American heritage?

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between what types of posts Italian Americans would like to see on social media pertaining to their ethnicity and their age group. The relationship between these variables was insignificant, X_2 (15, N = 89) = 19.694, p = .184. Full results are presented below.

Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
21. What other types of social media posts would you like to see more of regarding your Italian American heritage? (Choose all that apply) * 22. What is your age group?	89	80.2%	22	19.8%	111	100.0%

21. What other types of social media posts would you like to see more of regarding your Italian American heritage? (Choose all that apply) * 22.

What is your age group? Crosstabulation

Count

		22. What is your age group?				Total
		2	3	4	5	
21. What other types of social media posts would you like to see more of regarding your Italian American heritage? (Choose all that apply)		0	1	2	3	6
	Long Video	0	3	14	3	20
	Photo with Caption	1	3	3	4	11
	Short Video	1	5	18	6	30
	Text	0	1	2	3	6
	Referral to Website	3	2	4	7	16
Total		5	15	43	26	89

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	19.694[a]	15	.184
Likelihood Ratio	19.803	15	.180
N of Valid Cases	89		

a. 17 cells (70.8%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .34.

There was only a very slight generational disparity regarding what Italian American social media users would like to see more of in terms of heritage-related posts. Generation Z and Baby Boomers wanted to see more posts directing them to pertinent websites to get more information, while Generation X and Millennials wanted to see more short-form video content.

4. Discussion

As seen in the results presented above, Italian Americans are both passionate and proud of their ethnic heritage. Social media is one realm where they can express and experience their culture in various ways. The results of this study show that there are slight generational differences when it comes to the tangible experience of ethnic heritage on social media as a user determines what content is most effective as an educational and informative tool.

Choudhury (2022) explained that different generations use social media differently. For example, Baby Boomers are more active on social media than Millennials, and 84% of Baby Boomers report that social media has changed their lives. Choudhury (2022) also reports that 77.5% of Generation Xers are regular on digital sites, but that they are more straightforward and don't like to experiment like millennials. According to Choudhury (2022), Facebook was the dominant social media platform for Millennials, but Baby Boomers and Generation X tended to prefer YouTube, and Generation Z preferred Instagram. Choudhury's (2022) results are partially corroborated by this survey, as the only respondents to cite YouTube as a preferred platform were either Baby Boomers (3) or Generation X (2). Generation Z respondents to this survey also ranked Instagram as their favorite social media platform.

As seen in the results section, photos with captions were labeled by all generations as the most effective type of social media posts for them to learn more about their heritage. According to Patterson (2022), visuals on social media are no longer a nicety, rather, they are an essential, core component of a successful social media strategy. Patterson (2022) adds that on Twitter, Tweets with photos receive an average 35% boost in retweets, while Facebook posts with photos receive an average 37% increase in engagement, receiving 2.3 times more engagement than those without. Also, a Google Trends report shows that social images are so in demand that the search term "social media images" has been steadily increasing for years with no sign of slowing down.

Results of this study also show that there was a generational disparity in terms of what the least effective type of social media post was for them to discover more about their heritage. Both Generation X and Generation Z found longer-form videos lasting five minutes or more to be least effective, while Millennials and Baby Boomers felt that short, text-based posts without images were least effective. Boger (2020) writes that Generation Z has the shortest attention span of all the generations, lasting eight seconds. Conversely, Millennials have a 12-second attention span (Boger, 2020). Lukowski (2021) explained that Generation X tends to be drawn to more nostalgic video content that relates to past events or people or to an instructional video,

but because of their busy schedules due to families and careers, the shorter the video, the better. Baby Boomers, according to Lukowski (2021), still embrace traditional media, often preferring to get their information from print newspapers or television news.

This study also showed that Generation Z and Baby Boomers want to see more posts directing them to pertinent websites to get more information, while Generation X and Millennials wanted to see more short-form video content. These results relate to Boger (2020) and Lukowski (2021) regarding Millennials' and Generation X's shorter attention spans. A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center regarding Baby Boomers' Internet habits revealed that their generation prefers to access websites to learn more information about a specific topic compared to Generation X (*Baby boomers and the internet*, 2019). Mendez (2021) suggests that because nearly 80% of the Generation Z population has a smartphone, they may not necessarily seek information via a desktop website but, rather, from mobile-optimized websites that can be accessed from their phones or other portable devices. Mendez (2021) also reports that 23% of Generation Z would abandon a brand or website because of badly developed smartphone features.

The results of this study also confirm Lustig and Koester's (2006) intercultural communication competence framework, which again stresses that an individual's self-concept is built on cultural, social, and personal identities, with all three working together to form a person's overall identity. Those surveyed showed a strong cultural tie to their Italian American heritage that affected their personal identity to the point where they felt it was necessary to seek out Italian American-related content on social media. By participating in Italian American social media sites as either a fan or consumer of content, the respondents showed a social identity in which their cultural and personal identities play a defining role. This also serves to reinforce Lustig and Koester's (2006), belief that those who emphasize the group to which they identify socially feel as if they "belong" to "their" group (p. 138). While personal identities may differ due to generational differences, among other things, the respondents still culturally and socially belong to their Italian American heritage.

Symbolic interactionism theory as described by Chen (2019) also plays a major part in how the respondents respond to heritage-based social media content. Chen (2019) explained that a technology may represent radically different meanings to users across different social contexts and for different purposes. For this study, the respondents' cultural identity was used as the social context within which they operate. Respondents showed that their cultural identity does influence how they interact with social media content; for example, some felt that they experienced ethnic discrimination online due to their ethnicity when, possibly, the original poster did not mean this to be the outcome. Generational differences did occur at times when interacting with ethnic-based content, especially in terms of which content was least effective as an educational tool for discovering more about one's heritage. This could also be applied to symbolic interactionism theory because users are going to engage with the content they feel is most appropriate for their needs; a short video may be more appropriate for some users, while posts suggesting a user access another website for more in-depth information may be more beneficial to others.

To summarize, this study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: Do generational differences play a role in how people who claim Italian American ethnicity perceive their heritage as it is represented on social media?

Generational differences do not play a role in how people who claim Italian American ethnicity perceive their heritage as it is represented on social media. Good content is good content and effective social media content works regardless of generational differences. The

respondents to this survey also showed that their cultural heritage is something they feel from within, meaning that no social media content will influence what they believe to be true. If a person is proud of his or her ethnic heritage, that pride will carry through no matter what outside sources may say.

RQ2: What is the nature of the relationship between social media post efficacy and different generations of Italian Americans?

The response to this question was three-fold. While there was no significant generational difference regarding most effective social media posts, there was a difference regarding those that are least effective. This was due to attention spans and how different generations engage with social media. There was a slight generational difference regarding what types of posts different generations might like to see on social media regarding their heritage, which can also be attributed to how they use social media.

The information provided from these results could prove useful to Italian American organizations seeking to inform audiences of various heritage-related topics and initiatives that affect the community. These results could also help organizations and other social media outlets effectively market to different generations, including getting younger generations involved with their heritage to help preserve it for generations to come.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to determine the relationship between social media and various generations of the Italian American community, including determining if various types of social media posts affect them differently depending on their age. Presenting social media as a new host culture for Italian Americans where their ethnic identity serves as their primary point of reference as they navigate the digital world, this study also attempted to determine exactly how effective social media can be as a tool for discovering and learning more about one's ethnic heritage. This study was somewhat limited in scope, as there were not equal numbers of respondents from each generation represented, which could potentially skew results. An additional limitation was the generational breakdown that needed to be used as a result of the phrasing of the questions, which potentially caused members of one generation to be placed into another, distorting results. Further studies could include focusing on individual social media platforms to determine their generational use and efficacy, as well as studying other ethnic groups and their social media engagement. Regarding Italian American cultural identity, further studies could include examining the cultural differences between people whose families of origin hail from Northern Italy as compared to those whose families are from Southern Italy and how these play out via social media.

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Appendix

The questionnaire provided to survey respondents is below.

1. How many social media accounts do you have?

a. 1-2

b. 3-4

c. 5 or more

2. Which of these accounts is your favorite?

3. What percentage of Italian American ancestry do you claim?

a. Less than 25%

b. 26-49%

c. 50-74%

d. 75-100%

4. Which of your family members immigrated to the United States?

a. Mother

b. Father

c. Maternal Grandmother

d. Maternal Grandfather

e. Maternal Great-Grandparents

f. Paternal Grandmother

g. Paternal Grandfather

h. Paternal Great-Grandparents

i. Other

5. How many Italian American social media sites do you follow?

a. 1-2

b. 3-4

c. 5 or more

6. Which of these accounts is your favorite and why?

7. How has social media changed your perception of your Italian American ethnicity?

a. Positive

b. Negative

c. Neutral

d. Other

8. Do you feel you have learned more about your Italian American ethnicity from your family of origin or from social media?

a. Family of Origin

b. Social Media

9. Have your overall interactions with your Italian American ethnicity on social media been:

a. Positive

b. Negative

c. Neutral

10. Have you encountered discrimination on social media due to your Italian American ethnicity?

a. Yes

b. No

11. Is social media a valid tool for promoting ethnic culture?

a. Yes

b. No

c. Not Sure

12. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest, please rank how social media has helped enhance your personal Italian American experience:

a. Recipes

b. Italian Language

c. Italian Culture (including customs and superstitions)

d. Italian American History

e. Italian American Causes (such as Columbus)

f. Genealogy

g. Heritage Travel

13. What have been the most effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?

a. Photos with captions

b. Short videos (less than 3 minutes)

c. Longer-form videos (5 minutes or more)

d. Posts directing to pertinent websites

e. Short text-based posts

f. Other

14. What are the least effective posts pertaining to your Italian American heritage that you have seen on social media?

a. Photos with captions

b. Short videos (less than 3 minutes)

c. Longer-form videos (5 minutes or more)

d. Posts directing to pertinent websites

e. Short text-based posts

f. Other

15. What other types of social media posts would you like to see more of regarding your Italian American heritage?

a. Photos with captions

b. Short videos (less than 3 minutes)

c. Longer-form videos (5 minutes or more)

d. Posts directing to pertinent websites

e. Short text-based posts

f. Other

16. What is your age group?

a. Younger than 20 years old

b. 20-29 years old

c. 30-39 years old

d. 40-49 years old

e. 50-59 years old

f. Older than 60 years old

17. Do you have anything else to add?