

## Portrayals of Italian Americans in U.S.-Produced Films

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### Abstract

*Mass media play a major role in creating long-lasting portrayals of different minority groups. It is widely known that the public's perceptions of different cultures and ethnic groups can be influenced by the images and stories that they see on television, making the viewers think that these portrayals are accurate. This study focuses on the portrayal of Italian-Americans in U.S.-produced films from the 1970s to today. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to code nine movies (three films from the 1970s, three from the 1990s and three from this decade), for personality traits, occupation, and common stereotypes portrayed by the main Italian-American characters. Findings of this study indicate that, after 1990, the mafia and organized crime stereotype did not remain relevant. Even though this is positive, Italian-Americans continue to be negatively portrayed on screen in other ways. As one stereotype disappears or shifts, a new one is introduced, creating a different portrayal of Italian-Americans, but not necessarily a better one.*

### I. Introduction

This study analyzes how the Hollywood film industry has represented and portrayed Italian-American characters in U.S. films from the 1970s to today. This topic is important because throughout history the on-screen portrayal of Italian-Americans has been generally negative (Messina, 2004), causing harmful stereotypes to be associated with this ethnic group.

The public's perceptions of different cultures and ethnic groups can be influenced by the images and stories that they see on television, making the viewers think that these portrayals are accurate (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). But in reality, these pop-culture depictions might not correspond with authentic representations of the Italian-American identity. "In the electronic world, the media has more influence on cultural ideas and ideologies than do schools, religions, and families combined" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p.13), as such, media representations matter and can have a lasting impact. Directors and movie producers, one would expect, might want to move away from false representations, stereotypes and prejudice toward specific communities, but for that to happen it is important to systematically showcase these misrepresentations are still occurring.

The purpose of this research is to describe how Italian-American characters have been portrayed in U.S. films through time, to understand what stereotypes are presented about them, and to determine if these stereotypes have drifted away in recent movies, or if they have stayed the same through several decades.

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**Keywords:** cinema, stereotypes in media, Italian-Americans, qualitative content analysis  
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First, the paper will review the literature about media portrayals, cultivation theory, the main media portrayals of Italian-Americans in U.S. films in the past, and the different kinds of stereotypes associated with this ethnic group. Next, the paper's methodology (a qualitative content analysis) will be described, and finally the findings section will answer the research questions and link the results back to the literature.

## **II. Literature Review**

This study is about how Italian-Americans have been portrayed in U.S. films. For that reason, it is important to understand what previous research has found regarding the impact of media portrayals, media portrayals of ethnic groups in films, how cultivation theory explains the impact of media portrayals, the concept of stereotypes, and finally, what past studies have found about the portrayal of Italian-Americans in U.S. films.

The mass media have played a major role improving or destroying the image of different people, places, and parts of the world (Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998). Mass media's influential impact is responsible for the creation of specific portrayals of different groups and cultures (Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998). A media portrayal is a description or representation of someone or something in the media, such as in TV shows, films, or news (Portrayal, 2016). African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, Italian-Americans, and Native-Americans are ethnic groups that are commonly portrayed in the media with less respect than the portrayals of whites, without an accurate depiction of who they really are (Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998).

Fictional media at times represents a "public textbook" on ethnicity and the understanding of different cultures (Cortés, 1984, p. 64). "Social and behavioral scientists have assessed the impact of ethnic portrayals in film and TV and demonstrated that they really do teach..." (Cortés, 1984, p. 63). With entertainment media, people are more likely to learn about different ethnic groups and change their impressions about them, and these portrayals affect their personal perceptions and attitudes toward these groups (Cortés, 1984). Even though this process has the ability to cause positive outcomes, it can take a turn for the worse and result in the formation of negative connotations, especially since film, TV, and other media, have had a tendency to unfairly portray certain ethnic groups (Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998).

### ***Cultivation theory***

When people watch movies and TV they learn, gain knowledge, and shape different values, perspectives, and beliefs about what they are hearing and seeing on the screen in front of them (Bryant & Zillman, 2002). By assessing the amount of TV content that individuals watch on an average day and the impact it has on viewers' perceptions and attitudes, cultivation theory posits that "the more hours that people spend 'living' in the world of television, they are more likely to see the 'real world' in terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television" (Bryant & Zillman, 2002, p. 47). The more time people spend watching portrayals of characters on TV and in films, the more likely people will form attitudes about them, believing that this is how a certain group acts in real life (Messina, 2004). Not everyone has relations or direct contact with all ethnic groups in regular social settings, so TV and movies may become the "best" tool to learn about these groups. In that way, film and television can make a big impact in shaping ethnic stereotypes (Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt & Carson, 2009).

### ***Stereotypes***

There are positive and negative stereotypes. A basic definition of a stereotype is that it is a "conception, image, or belief about individuals and/or specific social groups" (Silverman & Silverman, 2012, p.1), and once these views or beliefs are established, they may be hard to change. Each ethnic group may have stereotypes that have stuck with them for a long time, because once stereotypes are formed, it is hard to get people to change how they think (Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt & Carson, 2009). Entertainment films may create and reinforce public images of ethnic groups such as Italian-Americans, for example, and these stereotypes can form negative representations (Cortés, 1987; Messina, 2004).

### ***U.S. Film Portrayals of Italian-Americans***

For decades, Italian-Americans have been a popular film subject, filling the screen with exciting,

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violent, and loud drama content (Cortés, 1987). In a study of 1,078 Hollywood films from 1931 to 1998 that featured Italian-American characters, 73% portrayed those characters negatively. The study concluded that, “for years Americans’ views of the ethnic group have been impacted by what they’ve seen on TV and the negative stereotypes that have been repeated in many different variations” (Messina, 2004, p. 90). Rather than moving away from these negative stereotypes, the media instead reinforces them by not including positive portrayals of Italian-Americans, as authorities, professionals, or executives (Messina, 2004).

Over the years there have been movies, such as *Saturday Night Fever*, *My Cousin Vinny*, and *Jungle Fever*, that have each depicted Italian-American characters as “crazy”— crazy in the sense they struggle to assimilate into American culture (Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998). Other feature films have portrayed the characters as uneducated but “street smart,” slobs, and tricksters – people that lie in order to succeed, and who are manipulative and disloyal (Cortés, 1987; Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998; Cavallero & Plasketes, 2010). But the main stereotype that has created inaccurate perceptions of Italian-Americans is their portrayal as gangsters (Dibeltulo, 2014). This negative stereotype has become the most prominent representation and has had the most impact (Cavallero & Plasketes, 2010). These criminal and gangster portrayals have made the whole ethnic group look like they were involved in the mob/mafia, when in reality there is a lot more diversity within the community (Messina, 2004).

Many films that focus on Italian-Americans heavily concentrate on the male characters (Reich, 2011). Italian-American male characters are commonly stereotyped as gangsters, Italian buffoons, or as a street tough, whereas Italian-American women have been portrayed as “the serious bombshell,” or “the overbearing” Italian mama (Szczepanski, 1979; Reich, 2011). Nancy Sovaca, an American film director, explains, “Being Italian American is not an excuse for irrational behavior and lunacy, as is literally signified in *Moonstruck’s* title and personified in that film’s characters” (Reich, 2011, p. 301). Just because a person, especially a woman, is Italian, does not mean that she acts loud and obnoxious, or that she argues all the time. But films have helped create this stigma by frequently portraying female characters acting in this type of manner. Along with this, Italian women are also commonly represented as housekeepers, by often showing them doing daily household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and serving for their family (Reich, 2011).

While this literature review hones in on negative portrayals and stereotypes of Italian-American characters in film, it is important to recognize that positive portrayals have started to emerge. Even though many stereotypes still appear, Italian-Americans are not viewed as outsiders anymore, and instead they have become members of “white” society (Cavallero & Plasketes, 2010). In films, Italian characters are now depicted as white-collar office workers, shop owners, and small business owners, and movies have started to move away from discrimination, and instead, sometimes, they celebrate Italian ethnicity (Cavallero & Plasketes, 2010).

Within such a context of change, this current study contributes to the literature by analyzing how the behaviors, stereotypes and portrayals of Italian-American characters in films have shifted or changed from the 1970s to today. The study does so by focusing these specific research questions:

1. What is the content/topic of each film analyzed in this study?
2. What are some of the common stereotypes portrayed by the Italian-American characters? (This might include, based on the literature, organized crime, loud/obnoxious characters, big families, pizzeria/barber occupations, among other portrayals).
3. What is the character’s occupation and how is that occupation portrayed?
4. What are the common personality traits of the Italian-American characters portrayed in the films?
5. How have the behaviors and stereotypes of Italian-American characters in film changed –or not— from the 1970s to present day?

### III. Methods

This study is a qualitative content analysis of nine films to analyze if the representation of Italian-Americans in U.S. films has stayed the same, over time, or has drifted away from stereotypes since the 1970s until today. Content analysis is a research method for “analyzing written, verbal, or visual communication”

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(Elo & Kynagäs, 2007). It is a systematic process of describing and coding occurrences that can then allow researchers to group words, phrases, and data into classified categories; this suggests that they all have something in common to one another (Elo & Kynagäs, 2007). Through this process, content analysis provides new insights about the phenomenon under study (Elo & Kynagäs, 2007).

In the past, there have been many movies that are either centered around Italian-American characters or that have characters of this ethnicity who are in supporting roles. To see how the portrayals of Italian-Americans changed—or not—through time, the researcher decided to analyze films from every other decade, starting with the 1970s and ending with the 2010s.

The researcher went to [www.Oscars.org](http://www.Oscars.org), looked at all the films that were nominated or won Oscar awards from the 1970s forward, and identified the movies that included Italian-American characters. Out of those films, movies were chosen for the study that had been nominated for one or more of the following categories: Best Picture, Best Actor/Actress in a leading role, and Best Actor/Actress in a supporting role.

There are two important things to note in this selection process. First, the researcher noticed that she would be analyzing both *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part 2* for the 1970s. Since the entire trilogy has the same genre, topic, and similar plotlines, the researcher decided to remove *The Godfather Part 2* and analyzed *Saturday Night Fever* instead. In this way, the researcher was able to analyze a different topic and point of view of Italian-Americans during this decade. Another consideration is that in the 2010s there was only one movie in the population that was recognized by the Academy. In this case, to complete three movies per decade, the researcher added *Unbroken (2014)* and *Little Italy (2018)*, films that do not meet the Oscar criteria of the other movies but portray Italian-Americans nonetheless. The sample, then, consists of nine movies in total: three from every other decade since the 1970s (in other words, from the 1970s, 1990s, and 2010s). Table 1 provides the name of the movie and the year it was released.

**Table 1. Movie title and Year**

Movie	Year
The Godfather	1972
Rocky	1976
Saturday Night Fever	1977
The Godfather Part 3	1990
Goodfellas	1990
My Cousin Vinny	1992
Unbroken	2014
Brooklyn	2015
Little Italy	2018

The films were watched from beginning to end and coded using instruments developed by the researcher. The categories coded were the movie's genre (found on <https://www.imdb.com/>), main topic, setting where the movie takes place (the Bronx, Brooklyn, slum, Little Italy), the common personality traits of the Italian-American characters portrayed in the films, the characters' occupation and how that is portrayed, the physical attributes (shape/dress appropriateness) of the characters, the common stereotypes portrayed by the characters (organized crime members, loud/obnoxious, big-family members, other portrayals, etc.), and a category for "other," to code any other aspect that seemed interesting or relevant for the study. As a result of this process of coding for "other" aspects, two new categories emerged as well: gender portrayals and religious portrayals.

As this qualitative coding was conducted only by the author of the study, intercoder reliability was not measured, but this is appropriate when the qualitative analysis follows the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this method, the researcher assigns labels to themes in the content (in this case, the movies' content), and then the researcher clusters those labels into categories for analysis, as it was the case for this study.

## IV. Findings

While there were some differences in the ways in which Italian-American characters were portrayed through the decades, since the 1970s to today, one commonality was found throughout the nine films: There were more negative than positive portrayals of the Italian-American characters' personality traits, stereotypes, and occupations, regardless the decade. The results for each coding category are described next.

### **Genre, Topic & Setting**

Many of the films fell into the drama and crime genres, followed by comedy and romance. One-third of the films were about crime, gangsters and the mafia (*The Godfather*, *The Godfather part 3*, and *Goodfellas*). The other topics in the films concentrated on Italian Americans' involvement in sports (*Rocky*) and in war (*Unbroken*), two college students getting accused of murder (*My Cousin Vinny*), disco and dance competitions (*Saturday Night Fever*), an immigrant moving to the United States and finding love with an Italian (*Brooklyn*), and best friends as pizza restaurant rivals while their kids start to fall in love (*Little Italy*). These films mainly take place in Brooklyn, either in the suburbs or a neighborhood, and in New York city. The film *Rocky* is set in the slums of Philadelphia, a poor area with graffiti and small apartments; *My Cousin Vinny* is set in Alabama, but it references that the Italian-American characters are from Brooklyn, and *Little Italy* is set in "Little Italy," Canada.

### **Physical Attributes**

Italian-American characters in each of the films are portrayed very similar to one another. The characters either dress business casual (wearing suits, dress pants and coats), or they wear casual clothes such as collared shirts or T-shirts. One noticeable aspect was how frequently the characters wear black clothes, including leather jackets, suits, coats, etc. The characters come off as having a "tough look" and serious appearance, based on the type of clothes they wear. Women sometimes are portrayed wearing tight clothing or accessories that make them stand out. For example, in *My Cousin Vinny*, Vinny's fiancé, Mona Lisa, wears tight dresses, big heels, and clothes with shoulder pads everywhere she goes when she is in Alabama. The men either slick or part their hair back, and the women have big hair and wear a lot of makeup. The Italian-American characters are portrayed, in general, as being very into their appearances, dressing fashionable, and liking to look presentable in public.

### **Occupation**

Italian-American characters have a variety of occupations in the films analyzed, but many of those occupations are with the Mafia, with the family business or in working-class jobs, for the most part (see Table 2 in the Appendix).

In both movies of the *Godfather* and in *Goodfellas*, being involved in the "family business," the mafia, and in criminal activities is portrayed as dangerous; they are the people that you do not want to associate or get involved with. In *Goodfellas*, the criminal activity that the men participate in suggests that Italians have no humanity and no moral tenets, but live an easy, "glamorous lifestyle," making tons of money through the drug trade but having poor taste (for example, with over-the-top decorations in their apartments and houses).

As for *Rocky*, he is a boxer trying to figure out his life and make something out of it. In the movie *Brooklyn* and in *Saturday Night Fever*, both main characters hold jobs (a plumber and a paint hardware store clerk) that are viewed as being the best careers that they will have. Having a job is deemed to be important to Italian-Americans, no matter the type of job it is, especially since it will help to support their families. Vinny, in *My Cousin Vinny*, is a lawyer. Granted, he has only been recognized as one for six weeks, and he is portrayed as a joke, but he has a job nonetheless. On the other hand, the families in *Little Italy* are pizza restaurant owners and cooks, involving the participation of the whole family. This is portrayed as typical and normal, especially since they live in Little Italy, but it also shows that they are passionate about and take pride in what they do.

### **Personality**

Table 3 in the Appendix summarizes the personality traits that were commonly found amongst all the Italian-American characters. Most of them are presented as being caring and loving toward their family

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members. They also have loud personalities, no matter the situation they are in, making them come off as demanding and eager to cause a scene. In the mafia and gangster movies, betrayal and untrustworthiness is very common; those involved never know when something bad will happen to them, or they think they are on good terms with the bosses, but in reality, they are not.

### **Stereotypes**

The stereotypes of the Italian-American characters are a mixture of both negative and positive portrayals (see Table 4 in the Appendix). One main stereotype commonly portrayed is being involved in the mafia and in organized crime. This also leads the characters to being stereotyped as aggressive, violent, and protective of their loved ones. Another common stereotype is that Italian-Americans are more street smart than book smart, being considered as “dumb” and bums. For instance, in *My Cousin Vinny*, it took Vinny six times to pass the bar exam. Also, because of his fiancé’s appearance and accent, she is portrayed as if she does not know anything about anything. But, really, she surprises the audience and is knowledgeable about the whole case, and she even helps prove the defendants are innocent because of her knowledge of auto mechanics, including tire marks. Even in the movie *Brooklyn*, the only member of the family who has good grammar and writing is the baby of the family, showing that not all members of an Italian-American family are given the opportunity to have an education.

All the characters are also featured either cooking, eating (mostly spaghetti or some type of meat), and drinking. No one ever eats alone, and eating tends to serve as a social event and coping mechanism. For example, in *Goodfellas*, when the men went to go visit one of their friend’s mother, she constantly asks if she can feed them, making a full meal of pasta. Even in *The Godfather Part 3*, when people were murdered, they ate pasta and other food to help cope with the massacre that they were just involved in. Whether this stereotype can be labeled as negative or positive is up for debate, but it is a common trait that is constantly featured in these types of films. In the movie *Rocky*, the boxing opponent mentioned that “if he can’t fight I bet he can cook.” This suggests that all Italians can cook, and it is one thing they have going on for themselves if all else does not. One stereotype that was also found within many of the movies is emphasis placed on how important family is in Italian culture and the love, care, and support that comes with it.

### **Gender Portrayals**

Regarding the roles of men and women in these movies, many of the male characters are portrayed as either the “bad guy,” an authoritative figure or the head of the household, whereas the women are mainly featured in the household setting, either cooking homemade food, worrying about their children, and/or staying out of their husbands’ business. In *Saturday Night Fever*, for instance, Tony’s dad is laid off from work, and the mother insists that she will get a job. This comes off as unacceptable and offensive to the husband, since “for 25 years in construction work I always brought home the paycheck.” Italian men are portrayed as liking feeling superior to their wives, especially when it comes to supporting the entire family, and that women are best at their job in the household. For example, as Tony was starting to clear the table, his father got mad at him. “Girls do that,” the father says.

In *Little Italy*, women are still portrayed as belonging in the kitchen, being part of the family pizza-making business, but, interestingly, they have more authoritative power than their husbands. They are constantly knocking sense into them and their immature ways, along with making their husbands afraid of them if they do something wrong; the males know that they never want to get on their wives’ bad side. This movie also portrays women, especially the daughter Nikki, wanting to make something out of themselves and experience other places beyond the bubble of their family pizza shop in Little Italy.

In the majority of the movies, women hold the portrayal of being motherly, constantly focusing on their children and doing everything possible for them. For example, even though Louis, in *Unbroken*, constantly gets into trouble with the police for stealing and drinking, his mother still provides him with affection and is his number one supporter for all his accomplishments. The same goes for the movie *Little Italy*. The mother figure only wants is her daughter to be happy and close to home, so she goes out of her way to introduce her to a man that could potentially be her boyfriend.

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### **Other Observations**

Besides noticing that the characters have thick Italian accents and speak Italian (short phrases and some slang) to one another, the impact that the Catholic religion has in the characters' lives is strong. Some of the characters are seen wearing gold crucifix chain necklaces and going to church as a family. In *Little Italy*, the Virgin Mary is featured a lot, and in *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony's brother is a Priest, which is an honor for the family.

## **V. Conclusion**

Based on the results of this qualitative content analysis, it is possible to conclude that some of the stereotypes and behaviors of the Italian-American characters have changed since the 1970s, but some have still continued to stay the same over time, causing this ethnic group to continue to be negatively portrayed on screen.

As previous scholarship indicated, the portrayal of Italian-Americans as gangsters and involved in the mafia has had the most impact on creating inaccurate perceptions of this ethnic group. Many scholars believe that *The Godfather* created a lot of harm to the Italian-Americans' image (Messina, 2004). In 2000, a study by the Commission of Social Justice found that 74 percent of the surveyed respondents believed that most Italian-Americans have some sort of connection to the Mafia (Messina, 2004). This was not based on facts, and the FBI reported in 2004 that only 2 percent of every 10,000 Italian Americans were involved in organized crime (Messina, 2004). A Cultivation effect seems to be in place here among the influenced audiences, especially for this stereotype, creating attitudes and behaviors toward this community that are based on what viewers inaccurately see on the screen, solidifying wrong beliefs about who Italian-Americans are (Messina, 2004).

This study found that after the year 1990, the mafia and organized-crime stereotype did not remain relevant or a common movie topic. It basically disappeared from the screen in more-recent movies. This helps weaken the prevalence of some negative personality traits and behaviors of the movie characters found before 1990, including being aggressive, violent, maniacs, hysterical (in the case of women), and prone to betrayal.

However, as one stereotype disappears or shifts, a new one is introduced, filling the empty space, creating another portrayal of Italian-Americans, but not necessarily a better one. This finding is in agreement with Cavallero and Plasketes (2010): "If the Italian was not seen as a gangster or a knife-wielding, mustachioed foreigner who had taken away American jobs from the earlier immigrants, then he was depicted as a restless, roving creature...very slow to take to American ways..." (p. 53).

Another negative portrayal found among many of the characters was their lack of intelligence, being considered as street-smart fools rather than book smart; this added comedy to the portrayals. This stereotype was noticed during the 1970s and all the way through the movies coded for the 2010s decade, along with characters having a loud personality, being hot tempered, and the concept of food involved in most aspects of their daily lives.

Even though the characters hold different occupations in the films, they are often portrayed negatively. In *Saturday Night Fever* and *Brooklyn*, for example, the occupations of the characters suggest that there are not any other jobs that they are qualified to do. In the movie *Little Italy*, the men of the family hold the position of pizza owners, portraying the families as just knowing how to make good, authentic Italian pizza, and being pros at it. Even though this is the most typical stereotype, especially for a movie plot located in "Little Italy," the movie also positively portrays and celebrates Italian ethnicity with their traditions and passions. The only movie that had a positive portrayal of Italians being successful in a white, "superior" society was *My Cousin Vinny*, but it took the whole movie for people to realize how competent and reliable the main character could be as a lawyer.

Even though Italian-Americans are mostly portrayed negatively, there were some instances where portrayals shifted toward being positive, for instance, when showing that Italians provide a loving and supportive family, but also the positive changes that gender roles have had in society. Italian-American women have been portrayed as "the serious bombshell," or "the overbearing" Italian mama who is always

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involved in household matters (Szczepanski, 1979; Reich, 2011). Even though some of these aspects were portrayed by the Italian-American women in the films this study analyzed, it was also apparent that, in more recent movies, women had more of a voice regarding different issues, and they started becoming just as equal, or more authoritative, compared to their husbands. In *Little Italy*, for example, the women stay on top of their husbands' every move and decision, along with knocking sense into them.

In summary, the results of this study support the view that, over the past decades, Italian-American characters have been stereotyped negatively, which is a form of subtle racism (Messina, 2004). Even though there have been some positive portrayals more recently, they are overpowered by the negative stereotypes that continue to linger or that evolve into new, negative roles. Representing Italian-Americans as "the other" has remained a common practice in Hollywood (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004).

In the coming decades, it would be interesting to see if these stereotypes continue to stay the same, as some of them have since the 1970s, or if new ones develop. Italian-Americans "need to be represented fairly, honestly, and accurately in public and academic cultures" (Messina, 2004, p. 111) for others to understand their complexity beyond a simplistic film setting.

### **Limitations and further research**

As any research project, this one had limitations that open opportunities for further research. For example, while conducting this content analysis, the author of this study realized that some of the films analyzed, including some of those which use the mafia portrayals and other common stereotypes, have been directed by Italian-American filmmakers. A future interesting avenue of research would be to investigate, perhaps through in-depth interviews, what has triggered these directors to portray Italian-Americans in this way, and to find out if they knew how much of an impact this stereotyping would have their own ethnic group.

Another promising topic for further research would be to look into whether Italian Americans are accepting of different ethnic groups or not, and to what extent. In the 2018 film *Little Italy*, an Asian American is portrayed as wanting to be Italian, and he assimilates to Italian American culture by trying to look and act like them. He changes his name to Luigi, has slicked back hair with a big belly, and wears a gold chain and an Italian belt that says, 'I am Italian.' He also incorporates a thick Italian accent into his dialect and says slang phrases in Italian. By assimilating into the culture and by imitating the physical attributes, he is more accepted in the community and does not look like an outcast. From this example, Italian-Americans are portrayed as being accepting of different ethnic groups, but it would be interesting to see if the effect of imitation, in this specific way, is seen as positive or negative by Italian-Americans.

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