

**From Saturday Night Fever to Jersey Shore:  
A study of the Italian American Guido through the Media Lens  
from the late 1970s to the Present**

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to look at the Italian American guido subculture as portrayed in the media through the film, Saturday Night Fever, and the reality television show, Jersey Shore. By comparing them, the study finds that guidos are portrayed as obsessed with clubbing, reckless substance abusers, superficial, materialistic, sex-obsessed, anti-intellectual, and sexist. In contrast to Saturday Night Fever, the guidos of Jersey Shore are much more assimilated when measured by the parameters set forth by Mary Waters in *Ethnic Options*. The study also finds, however, that Waters' criteria (extent of discrimination, residential segregation, and intermarriage) are not comprehensive enough, concluding that it is also important to quantify how people construct self-images of their ethnic identity and heritage. Unveiling this extra factor, the study argues that the "nostalgia complex" plays an important role in understanding the ethnic identity conundrum.

KEY WORDS: *Italian American, guido, ethnicity, assimilation*

I grew up the product of a Puerto Rican mother and a half Italian, part German and Russian father (we never knew the exact percentages of the latter half). I was born and raised in New Jersey. My grandfather on my father's side is a proud Italian American. Though he does not speak Italian, as a leader of the Columbus Day Parade Association 500 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, I have always thought that my grandfather wholly embodied what it meant to be Italian American in everything that he did. Because of my grandfather, I know that Ribera is the small town in Sicily from which my ancestors emigrated; because of him, I also know where to get the best Sicilian pie in town (Santillo's), and who has been making their meatballs and veal parmesan the same way for the past 75 years (Spirito's).

It was the year 1995 when my grandfather was working at the senior citizens' center in a small corner of Elizabeth where many older folks would often gather to play *bocce*, a game once played by the ancient Romans and popularized in America thanks to the influx of immigrant Italians at the turn of the century (US Bocce). As my father likes to tell the story, this would be when my grandfather made his "big break" into the film industry. A movie called *Tarantella*, a story about a girl wrestling with her Italian heritage and her identity (IMDb), was being filmed at the time, and they needed a few extras for a scene in which a group of older Italian Americans would be sitting around a table playing cards. When asked if he could play as an extra, my grandfather agreed and promptly asked, "Should I go home and change what I'm wearing?" The director looked at him for a moment and smiled, "You're perfect just the way you are."

My family would always laugh at this story. It was true--at times my grandfather really did seem like a caricature of the stereotypical Italian American type you would see in movies, complete with an array of "How you doin'?" and "Fuggedaboutit" catchphases. He never thought of himself as a stereotype, however--instead, he was his own person who

celebrated Italian customs passed down to him by his own mother and father. My grandfather always tried to instill a sense of Italian pride in my brother and me, and since I was little I can remember celebrating our Christmas Eves in the kitchen of his small apartment. “As Sicilians,” he would say, “it is tradition to celebrate the seven fishes. We are not supposed to have meat before midnight, and so we eat seven different seafood dishes in its place.” My favorite dishes that he prepared were his buttery baked scallops and lemon-roasted eel.

I was absolutely delighted when I was afforded the opportunity to study abroad in Italy for five months; I wanted to learn more about my ancestors, my traditions, who I was, and where I came from. I talked to people throughout Italy, but honestly my exchanges with native Italians sometimes left me feeling surprised, stupid, and even slightly deceived. Veal parmesan, I found out, was not actually Italian. No one eats spaghetti and meatballs together, either. Yet the most shocking of all of these discoveries was when I talked to a close friend from Sicily who lived on the southeastern coast in Syracuse. When I mentioned my family tradition of the seven fishes on Christmas Eve, he looked absolutely puzzled; he had never celebrated such a thing the night before Christmas, nor had he ever heard of any of his friends or family from any other parts of Sicily doing this, either. Recognizing the gaping disparity between my own perceptions of what it meant to be Italian and my friends’, I left Italy wondering how I could have lived a lie my entire life. *How could my grandfather let this happen? What was he hiding from me? Didn’t he know that his traditions were wrong?* And the most frightening question of all, *Am I really even an Italian at all?*

The question of ethnic identity has been one that many diverse peoples have grappled with since immigrants first came to America. The idea of what it means to be Italian, American, or any combination of the two has never quite been clear-cut, and as generation upon generation furthers itself from its ancestors through time, distance, citizenship, societal

customs, and beliefs, we are continually exposed to new and varied definitions of the experiences of people with shared roots in the same country.

The issues of stereotype, identity, and ethnicity are so pervasive in sociological literature that it is easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer depth of research done on the topics and their intertwining relationships with one another. My study will navigate several discussions, and in particular, I will be investigating the relationships between stereotypes, the media, and the Italian American identity of the *guido* as portrayed in the film, *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham 1977), and the reality television show, *Jersey Shore* (Salsano 2009-12). In doing so, I will look at the differences and similarities between both representations of the *guido*, and I will use Mary Waters' *Ethnic Options* as a theoretical basis from which I can analyze *guidos* as an unassimilated group of people based on their media portrayals.

## **I. Background**

Italian Americans are often overlooked as a targeted ethnicity for stereotyping and discrimination since they are considered white (Census), but in fact issues regarding the oppression of this ethnic group date back to 1870, where immigrant Italians--who were characterized by their dark skin and "low foreheads" (Alba & Abdel-Hady 2005)--were once considered "one of the most despised groups." Not only were they merely disliked, but they actually received similar or the same treatment as African-Americans in some parts of America: "In the South some Italians were forced to attend all-black schools and in both the North and the South they were victimized by brutality" (Waters 1990:2).

However as Italian Americans have risen in the ranks socio-economically to rival the incomes of white Americans without such oppressive histories, there have been mixed opinions amongst sociologists on the prevalence of ethnic disadvantage due to one's "Italian

Americanness.” In her book *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*, Mary Waters discusses how changes in socio-economic status have led to assimilation and states that the visible difference in the treatment of white ethnics with regards to opportunities for educational and occupational achievement has become virtually obsolete. To support her claim, Waters cites one study done in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1980 by James Crispino where she notes that 86 percent of respondents “reported never having experienced discrimination in housing, getting a job, or being promoted.” She also points to a study in 1984 in which Micaela diLeonardo also discovered that “most of her California Italian American respondents reported never having experienced discrimination” (Waters 95).

While her theory is clearly supported by legitimate evidence, these studies both reflect and leave out a few aspects that could lead to her ideas of discrimination being somewhat skewed (when viewed in the present-day): (1) her studies were all based on perceptions of discrimination rather than actual discrimination. It is possible that people may have actually been discriminated against, yet the subtlety of the discrimination may have left the person unaware of its presence (to give credit to Waters, this is extremely difficult to test for). (2) These surveys only describe de jure discrimination and ignore the fact that de facto discrimination could also have significant effects on one’s life experiences. (3) Her book, published in 1990, and the studies she cites which obviously preclude the date of publication, reflect a period of time over two decades ago.

In the past 22 years, America has undergone a plethora of changes with regards to attitudes towards race and sexuality, technological advancements, changes in demographics (especially due to intermarriage), and naturally through cultural evolution. In some ways, America has become much more progressive, as we have twice elected a half-black president due largely to the minority votes in both the 2008 and 2012 elections (AP 2012). Yet issues of

sexuality, race and ethnic identity are still hotly-contested topics today. Technology has also evolved in myriad ways: television-watching has become much more widespread and the internet has expanded worldwide, with a little over 78 percent of the United States population having accessed the internet in the past twelve years, thus increasingly globalizing populations that may have not been otherwise connected (Internet World n.d.). Needless to say, there are numerous variables yet to be accounted for in Waters' book.

## **II. Stereotypes and the Media**

The 2000 Census says that Italians comprise the sixth largest ethnic group in America (US Census 2000), but sociologists Richard Alba and Dalia Abdel-Hady claim that the stereotypes associated with this group of people “have not waned in tandem with this acceptance,” and in fact, “contemporary stereotypes reveal an ancestral resemblance to those that confronted Italian immigrants”. Their studies have also confirmed that the effects of such ethnic disadvantage due to negative stereotyping are real, and note that Italian Americans are “the largest ethnic group that might be subject to exclusion without the benefit of counteravailing pressures” (2005). In addition to this, in his study on mafia-related prejudice and Italian American politicians, Stefano Luconi notes that while the number of Italian American politicians in office has definitely increased, a recent study revealed that “74 percent of Americans still associate Italian Americans with organized crime” (1999).

While the Italian American experience has certainly improved in a multitude of ways, the presence of Italian American stereotyping is still very real. This is especially apparent when looking through the lens of the media, as the number of negative portrayals of Italian Americans in movies from 1928 to 2002 outnumber the positive ones, with 69% of films being negative (Italic Institute 2002). For these reasons, it is considered important for some

sociologists to look at Italian Americans as a type of ethnic minority. Understanding how these specific aspects have adversely affected Italian Americans reveals the real-life consequences of these stereotypes on a large group of people over an extended period of time, and it sheds light on how discrimination (even against white ethnicities) still plays a prominent role today in determining one's accessibility to the academic elite (Alba & Abdel-Hady 2005) and the political sphere (Luconi 1999), among other opportunities as well.

Thus, referring back to the original point of ethnic comparison, since Italian Americans are often overlooked as a disadvantaged ethnicity due to their "whiteness," it subsequently becomes all the more imperative to discuss what types of challenges Italian Americans face, especially with the overwhelming amount of media representations of Italian American culture which claim to represent or perpetuate certain ideas about Italian American cultures, individuals, choices, and lifestyles.

With the treatment of Italians first being considered more similar to African-Americans than to other whites, to Italian Americans rising into the socio-economic ranks of other whites, to the various stereotypes thrown against them through films and television, we begin to wonder what the Italian American's relationship is with the rest of American culture. With the generous help of the media, Italian Americans are often perceived with certain stereotypes, including having close family values, respect for others, and being culinarily-inclined. Yet more negative stereotypes regarding Italian Americans have been just as pervasive, if not more so, in the past, and stereotypes often include being misogynistic, unintelligent, and involved in organized crime (Alba & Abdel-Hady 2005).

The influence of the media and its representations of ethnicity cannot be understated: when discussing ethnicity with her respondents, Waters notes that they usually learned about their ethnicity through mainly two outlets: "from their family or from the mass media," with



no intermediate groupings such as ethnic voluntary organizations or even ethnic neighborhoods influencing how they perceived and learned about their heritages (Waters 1990:130). In addition to this is the effect that media images have on both in- and out-groups. In her investigation on the mass media's obsession with the gangster image (with emphasis on the Italian American gangster), Laura Cook Kenna found that gangster images as portrayed through, music, movies, and television have a two-fold effect for audiences: they have been "widely acclaimed as 'authentic' expressions of culturally distinct identities" and they are considered "site and stake in the cultural construction of the Italian- or African-American identities they represented" (2008). While this most certainly reflects how negative images of Italian Americans as gangsters have been perpetuated through the media, the underlying theme behind this is even more general: it reveals how powerful the media is in determining not only how we identify our own ethnicities with which one is already familiar, but it also reflects how profoundly media portrayals of groups of people determine how individuals identify different ethnicities as well.

### **III. Methodology behind Analysis of Guido Media Representations**

At first I wanted my research to navigate around the idea of how exactly the media has captured changes in portrayals of Italian American identities. I believed that there was a distinct shift regarding the types of stereotypes that were represented back in the 70s and 80s and the types of stereotypes that are represented in the present day today. In the past from the Godfather and Goodfellas to the Sopranos we have seen how Italians have been viewed as low-class gangsters who knew how to handle guns and run families at the same time (this is something most of us are already cognizant of, and I doubt that there is any real sociological need for me to expand on the prevalence of mafia stereotypes in film), and it was my belief

that we have now moved into a more contemporary shift in media representations of Italian Americans, though not necessarily for the better. This shift in stereotype would be marked by the presence of the guido in mainstream media with the introduction of the reality television program, Jersey Shore.

However, as evidenced by the work of Tricarico in chapter four of this study, my initial hypothesis regarding the evolving focus of the media from the mafia to the guido was incorrect. As Tricarico notes, the guido was in fact an extremely prevalent representation due to the immense popularity of the movie Saturday Night Fever, which glamorized the life of the young protagonist and Italian American Brooklynite, Tony Manero (Tricarico 1991). Naturally, the focus of my research re-aligned in order to complement this revelation. It seemed only fair that the birth of the guido stereotype in the media would be one of the means through which I compare how the representations of the guido have changed over time.

On the other end of the chronological spectrum is Jersey Shore, which started airing in December of 2009, nearly three decades after the first screening of Saturday Night Fever. In its third season, Jersey Shore gained the title of most-watched MTV telecast series *ever* with 8.4 million viewers (Hibberd 2011)--eventually even this record was broken as the number crept up even higher to 8.8 million followers in the middle of the third season (Andreeva 2011). With such immense popularity, Jersey Shore seemed like the most prominent--and thus the most appropriate---display of guidos in the mainstream media today.

Consequentially, I will specifically be referring to both Saturday Night Fever and Jersey Shore as metaphorical bookends in a timeline of portrayals of guidos in the media. This will be especially useful in comparing the changes in representations, stereotypes, and perceived values of guidos and Italian American culture over a substantial, yet manageable,

period of time. In doing so, my goals for my research are three-fold: (1) How are the Italian American identity and its guido subculture characterized through the media?; (2) How has the media's portrayal of the guido identity evolved (with reference to both the film and the television show), especially with regards to character assimilation versus ethnic authenticity?; and (3) Are these characterizations necessarily representative of theories of Italian American identity as explained by Mary Waters in *Ethnic Options*? Does she miss anything?

#### **IV. Jersey Shore**

The tremendous rise in popularity of MTV's hit reality television show Jersey Shore took the world by storm and left its mark on people in more ways than one. Considered by many people to be a complete joke, the show is a means of portraying even more stereotypes but of a nature very distinct from those of the gangster or the greaser. The premise of the show was simple enough: in 2009, MTV put eight 20-somethings together in a shore house in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, and taped their all of their antics, including their parties, their collective part-time job at the t-shirt shop on the boardwalk, their friendships, their relationships, and everything in between. What united these cast members was not only their age, however. Casting notices for Jersey Shore were placed by MTV that asked for "loud, proud Italians" to audition to become a member of the television program (Bruno 2009). Each member of the show was picked for their distinctiveness as a "guido" (for males) or "guidette" (for females) (Pilkington 2010). Since then, MTV and the show Jersey Shore have been heavily criticized by some for exploiting the guido subculture: "One showing of a program like 'Jersey Shore,' and that's what people think all Italian-Americans are like" (Cohen 2010).

## **V. The Term “Guido”**

The meaning behind the term *guido* has a long and somewhat complicated history. Originally, it was meant to refer to working-class Italian Americans in a disparaging way, but unlike other offensive terms such as “*guinea*” or “*greenhorn*,” the word *guido* is actually thought to have been introduced by Italian Americans themselves. Historically, it has been claimed that Italian Americans would refer to other Italians who had recently immigrated to America and were not yet assimilated as *guidos*, thus “conferring inferior status on immigrants who are ‘just off the boat’” (Brooks 2009).

While it is not necessarily the most offensive of the terms used against Italian Americans, it has definitely been offensive enough to cause some people, my family included, to refuse to even say the word out loud (Brooks 2009). Furthermore, the use of the word *guido* in association with the MTV television show caused a major outcry from Italian American service organizations like UNICO, which criticized the television network for allowing Italian Americans to be described in such derogatory terms and declaring that *Jersey Shore* was “trash television” (Morgan & Melago 2009). Additionally, the extent of the perceived offensiveness of the term *guido* also caused Domino’s Pizza to ask MTV to pull their advertisements during the show, and in response the television network stated, “*Jersey Shore* may not be for every sponsor or advertiser and we understand that”. While MTV did eventually pull the word *guido* from voiceovers and descriptions of the show, they let the cast members of the show use the terms freely (Friedman 2009).

Sociologist Donald Tricarico has studied Italian American culture for over 20 years, however, and he believes that the word *guido* is much more nuanced than some critics may claim the word to be. The usage of the term has become even more widespread as the word has been used not just as an insult, but as a description of a specific youth culture in the tri-

state area borne out of an identification with the Italian American community. Thus, Tricarico claims that the pejorative nature of the word *guido* is largely generational--the era in which one is born will largely predict how strongly you would react to the use of the word (Brooks 2009).

Fred Gardaphe, Distinguished Professor of Italian American studies at Queens College, also disputes the claim that the term *guido* is strictly pejorative. Instead, he believes it originates from a stereotype: "It's a real handsome, uneducated kid who gets by on his charm and doesn't really have much going for him" (Brooks 2009). Members of the Jersey Shore cast also have strong feelings on the use of the word *guido* in association with their television show. Jersey Shore cast member Nicole Polizzi (also known as Snooki on the show) knew that people were going to be upset about the use of the term *guido* on the show. She stated that it was not meant to be a derogatory term, but instead a term to be used "to describe Italians who like to look good and be the center of attention, and there's nothing wrong with that" (Friedman 2009). Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino, another cast member of the show, reinforced these sentiments by reasserting the generational differences and adding a positive spin to the term:

If you do see the show, you see [the word *guido*] used in a loving or a good way.

The older generation doesn't understand. These days in New York and New Jersey a 'guido' is a good-looking Italian male that likes to have fun and a 'guidette' is a good-looking Italian girl. (Stack 2009)

Not everyone necessarily agrees on the legitimacy of these statements, however. *UrbanDictionary.com*, a "popular online slang dictionary" (Damaso & Cotter 2009) that allows people *en masse* to indiscriminately submit their own definitions of cultural phenomena, situations, and actions, currently has 127 user-submitted definitions for the word

guido alone (this is apart from the other 37 related words that alphabetically precede and successively follow the entry in the dictionary). Of those definitions, the most popular rendering notes that while a guido does not necessarily have to be Italian American, they usually are. With nearly 19,000 up-votes which denote UrbanDictionary users' approval of the definition versus less than 3,000 down-votes, the submission negatively employs the term guido in a way that is largely reminiscent of a program on Animal Planet, specifying the guido's typical wardrobe and recreational activities, "genetic links," and "natural habitat," thus equating the guido to a species entirely distinct from humans.

The definition also assigns other negative characteristics to the word, deeming the guido a "sad, pathetic excuse for a male" and "tacky," claiming that guidos only work in "food delivery, telemarketing [*sic*], or construction". In addition to this, the author of the definition accuses the guido of violence, mob-mentality, racism, homophobia, and rape, noting that, "Guidos enjoy beating up a non-white or homosexual while assisted by a group of 5-10 guido friends backing them up; [and] engaging in date rape" (Urban Dictionary n.d.). While those who voted positively for this definition may not necessarily believe all of these things, the overwhelming approval of this definition is certainly representative of the types of disparaging connotations, representations, and stereotypes that surround this word in popular culture.

## **VI. Guidos in Saturday Night Fever**

In 1991, Donald Tricarico was the first sociologist to recognize the guido as its own cultural phenomenon entirely distinct from other popular representations of Italian American culture. Whereas the "greaser"--one of the main predecessors of the guido--was distinguished from preps and collegians in the 1950s and 60s as an "urban, working class youth

subculture” that probably emerged from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, with gangs heavily associated with “defending turf, scrawling graffiti on buildings and staging fights with gangs from neighboring areas,” the guido youth movement developed from the advent of the disco scene in the latter half of the 1970s (Tricarico 1991:48-49).

Tricarico states that while movies like *Grease* and *The Lords of Flatbush* and the television sitcom, *Happy Days*, portrayed the greaser character nostalgically and “sanitized him for middle class consumption,” the portrayals of the disco-obsessed guido Tony Manero (played by John Travolta) in *Saturday Night Fever* were a “glamorous escape to youth from blue-collar, ethnic backgrounds” and also from “the socioeconomic reverberations of the ‘oil crisis’ and double-digit inflation”--this in sharp contrast to the “denigrated and marginalized” greaser in the 1960s and early 1970s (1991:49).

New York State Senator Diane J. Savino agreed with this sentiment at a 2010 conference centered around guido culture and the Jersey Shore, stating: “[*Saturday Night Fever*] changed the image for all of us.” The prior image Senator Savino refers to is one where “everybody listened to rock; girls were supposed to be skinny, with straight blond hair [... and] guys had ripped jeans, sneakers, and straggly hair.” Senator Savino claims that *Saturday Night Fever* paved a way for Italian Americans to “take pride in their heritage and define ‘cool’ for themselves” (Cohen 2010). From this depiction of the birth of the guido one could conclude that, “Guidos are the true descendants of Tony Manero” (Tricarico 1991:49).

## **VII. Similarities between *Saturday Night Fever* and *Jersey Shore***

In this chapter, I will be discussing various aspects in both *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham 1977) and *Jersey Shore* (Salsano 2009-12) which have remained constant in spite of the nearly three decade difference in time periods. While a multitude of semblances between

the film and the television show were noted within my research, the stereotypes I will be discussing and investigating will include the shared representations *most* emphasized in both: (A) the youth culture's club lifestyle and dancing, (B) recklessness and substance abuse, (C) the collective emphasis on aesthetic and consumerism, (D) portrayals of anti-intellectualism and low intelligence, (E) casual sex and the objectification of women.

#### A. Club Lifestyle & Dancing

The club lifestyle is an essential aspect of both portrayals of the *guido* in the past and the present. The club is where all of the action happens, and it is depicted as the center of the *guido's* "universe." Without the club setting, neither *Saturday Night Fever* nor *Jersey Shore* would be the same: in *Saturday Night Fever*, the young protagonist Tony Manero and his companions looked forward to going to the same spot every weekend, *2001 Odyssey* (in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn), which was the place to be seen during the "disco craze". *2001 Odyssey* is precisely where Tony's aspirations as a dancer blossom and where he meets his love interest and dance partner, Stephanie Mangano (Badham 1977).

On the *Jersey Shore*, the highlight of every episode for the cast would be when they finally arrived at their club of choice, typically *Bamboo* or *Karma* (both in Seaside Heights, New Jersey), which regularly plays top 40 hits and house music. In both these portrayals, the *guido's* entire existence seems to revolve around the energy and dynamics of the club lifestyle. Not only were these clubs places to socialize recreationally with friends, but they were also hubs that nurtured sex, sexuality, and meeting someone new, usually only for the night--or even in some cases, for just a few hours. This is evidenced by the consistent reliance on the club as a means to pick up strangers to take home with them in both *Jersey Shore* and *Saturday Night Fever*. Pauly DelVecchio (also known as "Pauly D" on the show) in the first



season explains, “When I go to the club I have a game plan. I don’t wanna waste my time and take home a girl that just wants to hang out--I just wanna get to the business” (Salsano 2009-12).

In addition to this, because clubs are only at nighttime, there is a certain amount of appeal in the darkness and anonymity the club atmosphere provides to the guidos. This effect is bolstered with alcohol usage, which allows for people to lose their inhibitions and let go of reality: in *Saturday Night Fever*’s case, this was to let go of the pressures of feeling trapped in a seemingly dead-end working class urban area, yet in the case of *Jersey Shore*, the clubs in Seaside Heights provided excitement and vivacity in sharp contrast to the mundane suburbs from which mostly all of the cast members originated. Tony feels as though the dance floor is the only place where he can truly succeed in life, and in reaction to his disapproving father after he receives a small raise at work, Tony exclaims, “You know how many times someone told me I was good in my life? Two! Twice! Two fucking times! This raise today and dancing at the disco!” (Badham 1977).

As this quotation points out, the actual club is not the only vital aspect to the guido identity as portrayed in *Saturday Night Fever*; the style of dance demonstrated while at the club is--according to its portrayal--indicative of guido culture as well, based on the consistency of the two cases studied. At the end of *Saturday Night Fever* when Tony wins the prize for best couples dance at 2001 Odyssey, we see how stereotypes of ethnicity and dance styles are intrinsically tied together: the Puerto Rican couple dances the salsa while Tony and his partner Stephanie, both Italian Americans, dance to the disco hit by the Bee Gees, “More than a Woman.” Because we learn that Tony wins not on his own merit (even though the Puerto Ricans were objectively better dancers), we begin to understand the role that ethnic affiliations play with regards to the dynamic of the club lifestyle and dancing. Tony exclaims,

“It was rigged. That’s like family. They can’t give [the prize] to a spic, a stranger!” (Badham 1977). Certain ways of dancing were associated with certain ethnic groups, and although Tony did not feel as though his dancing deserved to win the contest, in this film one can understand how certain subcultures of people are ascribed worth and talent based on one’s ethnicity and affiliation to the “in-group”.

While the issue of race and ethnicity is not necessarily quite as intrinsic in distinguishing the guido from other types of subcultures and ethnicities in Jersey Shore (and by this, I mean to say that being of a different race or ethnicity does not necessarily exclude one from being a guido and using the same types of “guido-esque” dance moves), there is an element of specialization associated with certain dance moves on the television show that are “distinctly guido.” These differences are apparent when Jenni “Jwoww” Farley and Snooki take a road trip to Miami in the second season of the show.

While the guidos of Jersey Shore popularized dance moves like “The Jersey Turnpike,” the move that is most heavily associated with the guido throughout the show is the “fist pump.” Thus, it comes to no surprise that when Snooki and Jwoww make a pit stop at a bar (very obviously different in style from the likes of their beloved Bamboo and Karma) in Savannah, Georgia, and they ask a suitor--a white male with a southern drawl wearing a slightly oversized t-shirt and a cap; clearly *not* a guido--to show them his fist pump, they are left disappointed and do not take his attempts at courtship seriously. Snooki is especially unimpressed as she describes the encounter: “So he, like, goes into this exorcism mode, he rolls his head, and then he starts convulsing. And I was like, alright, we need to get out of this state ASAP” (Salsano 2009-12).

This interaction between Snooki and Jwoww and the male from Georgia is a typical example of in-group/out-group socialization on Jersey Shore. The difference in dancing

abilities is representative of the larger concept of “bumping-heads” between two markedly different “types” of people. With the realization that this male was not like them based partly on his dancing, Snooki furthers herself from the man even more by saying, “Obviously he, like, fucks his sister for a living.” This offensive statement creates a divide between the man from Georgia and their guido identity; Snooki marks her group as superior by writing the man off as a “redneck” through her remarks about inbreeding; furthermore, she reveals her prejudices about people from that geographic area (Jarosz & Lawson 2002). This brands the guido as a prejudiced group of people that places a high priority on specific types of nightlife culture and specialized dancing in order to distinguish themselves from a purportedly “inferior” category of people.

#### B. Recklessness and Substance Abuse

Hand-in-hand with the club lifestyle is the portrayal of guidos as abusers of alcohol and illegal substances, often leading to situations in which recklessness and irresponsibility are abundant. In the case of *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony is an example of an exception proving the rule (probably so that the audience could find the protagonist likable in spite of other, less ideal decisions he makes). Tony is continuously pressured to take drugs before going to the club and even while inside of it. While they are all in the car, one of his friends presents him with the array of substances available for consumption that evening: “We have ups, downs, three ludes, two jays and a half a bottle of vodka” (Badham 1977). To heighten the significance of substance abuse throughout the film, near the end of *Saturday Night Fever*, one of the younger males who looks up to Tony and tries to emulate him drunkenly falls off the Verrazano Bridge to his death after seeing his friends play on the bridge rails dozens of times beforehand. Additionally, Annette, the girl who has amorous feelings for

Tony, is the victim of a double rape in the back of a car while Tony's friends are under the influence of speed, a stimulant drug.

Fortunately there have been no acts of sexual assault or deaths on the Jersey Shore, but in spite of that the recklessness and destruction (on oneself and towards others) demonstrated on the program is definitely significant enough to be deemed a glaring similarity between both the show and the movie. In the sixth and final season of Jersey Shore, Mike "The Situation" returns to the house clean after admitting that he had been addicted to prescription painkillers in past seasons. Tabloids and other cast members also insist that not only was he addicted to painkillers, but that he used cocaine and abused alcohol as well. According to Angelina Pivarnick, a former cast mate on the show, Mike had been doing drugs for a long time: "I don't understand how nobody caught on to him doing a mass amount of drugs!" (Chen 2012).

Additionally, there has been a lot of speculation that Mike, Pauly D, and Ronnie Magro, especially, regularly use steroids (Emery 2012). This speculation is bolstered by Snooki's affections for Ronnie in the first season, and how she explains that Ronnie is just her type, "a nice, juiced, hot, tanned guy," (Salsano 2009-12) with "juiced" being the operative word in the phrase, signifying a person who regularly uses steroids (Urban Dictionary n.d.).

Alcohol abuse is yet another aspect of substance abuse which is treated very casually on Jersey Shore. There have been a total of four arrests on the show, with all of the crimes being alcohol-related. On season one, Ronnie was arrested for aggravated assault after getting "involved in the first of many bar brawls." On the third season, an inebriated Snooki was arrested for disorderly conduct after having gotten drunk that afternoon. On season five, Mike's friend "The Unit" was arrested by the police after seen drunkenly stumbling down the

streets of Seaside and was eventually charged with drug possession as well. On season six, Deena Nicole Cortese, a cast member, was arrested for disorderly conduct after drunkenly dancing in the middle of the street in the daytime (that charge was eventually dropped and replaced with a lesser charge). While no one was arrested in the last incident aired on Jersey Shore, a bar brawl at Bamboo also occurred in the sixth season, and Ronnie eventually had to attend a court hearing “after accusations were made about his allegedly violent behavior” (Friedman 2012).

The continual use and abuse of alcohol and drugs in both Saturday Night Fever and Jersey Shore are indicative of how tightly the guido subculture is affiliated with substance abuse thanks to their portrayals in the media. While Saturday Night Fever at least has some elements of drama and emotional consequences embedded within the plot line that add a sense of seriousness to the abuse of certain substances, Jersey Shore’s reputation as a source of pure entertainment packed with funny one-liners makes it extremely easy for people to directly associate guidos with care-free partying, casual substance abuse, and seemingly-spontaneous destructiveness.

### C. Materialism and Superficiality

The first scene of Saturday Night Fever captures it perfectly: a tall, young, and handsome John Travolta flashily struts down a crowded Brooklyn sidewalk in a bright red, wide-collared button-down shirt tucked snugly into black bellbottoms, swinging a can of paint to the lively beat of “Stayin’ Alive” by the Bee Gees. His hair--large, black, and perfectly coiffed--complements the glinted chains of gold hanging from his neck. He is an entirely different breed of man, and as he walks against sidewalk traffic back to the paint store, he catches sight of something that immediately stops him in his tracks: a pair of sharp

red leather shoes in the window display of a store--a pair that, as he swiftly lifts his foot to compare, he already owns. Here, Tony Manero is the epitome of style.

In *Saturday Night Fever*, style, vanity, and materialism are vital in shaping the character of Tony Manero. Near the beginning of the film, Tony walks into his home and tries to convince his parents he is not hungry for dinner--in fact, he is avoiding dinner so that he will prevent his mother's sauce from getting on the shirt he plans on wearing to *2001 Odyssey*. He is obsessed with the way he looks; after his father smacks him in a dispute at the dinner table, the only thing Tony cares about is the well-being of his mane. He remarks, "Would you just watch the hair? You know, I work on my hair a long time and you hit it. He hits my hair" (Badham 1977). As Tony walks up the stairs and into his room, rather than reflect on his job at the paint shop or on the rocky relationship he has with his parents, he instead chooses to gaze at himself in the mirror and flex.

*Jersey Shore* similarly places a high emphasis on materialism and aesthetic. The self-proclaimed guidos of *Jersey Shore* have a very distinct appearance which they adhere to completely. The males of the show have nearly copyrighted the acronym "GTL," which is a superficial process necessary for all of the men in the *Jersey Shore* house before heading out to any big event in the evening. One cast member of the show, Vinny Guadagnino, explains exactly what GTL is: "GTL. Gym. Tanning. Laundry. That's how you make the guidos." All of the cast members of the show seem to be aware of certain standards that qualify a person as a guido. Sammi "Sweetheart" Giancola, one of the cast members, details the dress code of a guidette in the pilot episode of the show: "A guidette is somebody who knows how to club it up, takes really good care of themselves, has pretty hair, cakes on makeup, has tanned skin, wears the hottest heels--pretty much they know how to own it and rock it" (Salsano 2009-12).

Pauly D agrees with the sentiment that the obligations of a guido are largely aesthetic, stating, “You gotta stay fresh-to-death, I call it: fresh outfit, fresh haircut, fresh tan. Just stay fresh.” Hair, it seems, is of utmost importance to all members of the cast, and when Pauly D describes a hypothetical relationship with Snooki, he states that their offspring would be ideal guidos because of their authentic guido hairstyles: “In a weird Snookers [nickname for Snooki] world, like me and Snookers would make the best, like, little guidos and guidettes, little poofs and blow-outs on our little kids” (Salsano 2009-12).

The enormous emphasis on appearances--in this case, the iconic guido hairstyles of the “poof” and the “blow-out”--rather than the shared celebration of Italian culture is certainly intriguing. In nearly every definition of the guido stated on the show, there is little to no emphasis on actually being Italian, and when the ethnicity is mentioned, the term is framed very two-dimensionally, with similar or only marginally higher emphasis on Italian ethnicity than any *other* aspects of the guido subculture. That is to say, while being a guido definitely includes Italian heritage, to claim that guido culture is 100 percent based solely on the celebration of Italian ancestry and culture would be entirely false. In fact, it seems as though being Italian American is only a check off the list of *many* “requirements” of being a guido: without “the look,” there is no way you could be considered a guido by the show’s standards, whether both of your parents came off the boat from Sicily or not. Conversely, if you do have the look and do celebrate the guido subculture in an acceptable manner according to other guidos, others will be willing to overlook the fact that you may not actually be Italian American.<sup>1</sup> This preference for aesthetic and materialism over cultural celebration subsequently frames the guido as superficial and inauthentic.

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, I am referring to Snooki and Jenni, who are not Italian American. Jenni is Spanish and Irish; Snooki, who was adopted by Italian American parents, is Chilean (UsWeekly 2010B). Additionally, Ronnie is half Italian American and half Puerto Rican (Piepho 2012).

The realization that aesthetic dominates choices of ethnic identification (since non-Italian American cast members are considered guido due to their looks and behaviors) correlates with Mary Waters' analysis of physical appearances in relation to perceptions of ethnicity and stereotypes surrounding that ethnicity. She states:

[A person's physical appearance] can constrain an individual's choices of which ancestries to identify with. If one is 'marked' as Italian as opposed to Irish, one will tend to identify with Italians. (Waters 1990:75)

This concept of "physical appearance" also overflows into style as well, since most stereotypes surrounding an ethnicity involve not just physical features, but the way in which people choose to adorn themselves.

#### D. Lower Intelligence and Anti-Intellectualism

In 1990, the *New York Times* released a shocking statistic regarding the welfare of Italian Americans in New York City schools: a study showed that one in five Italian Americans dropped out of high school. At that point in time, Italians were the largest white ethnic group in the city, and they had the third-highest dropout rate. Community leaders across the city spoke out against this phenomenon, with many of them saying that negative media portrayals held much of the blame for influencing Italian American youth. "Italian-American youth are highly influenced by popular culture, like all others," stated Richard Gambino, the then-director of Italian American Studies at Queens College, "Hollywood has given an image over the years that Italian-Americans are inferior, physical, anti-intellectual" (Lee 1990).

The guido portrayal of Italian Americans is no exception to this stereotype. In *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony Manero is staunchly against higher education, and whenever



other characters bring up planning for the future, Travolta's character gets frustrated and erupts into an angry outburst. When he goes out for coffee with Stephanie, for example, she accuses him of only focusing on the present rather than the future. She calls him a walking "cliche," telling him, "You're nowhere. On your way to no place. Did you even think about going to college?" to which Tony crossly responds, "No. Fuck off" (Badham 1977).

While in Jersey Shore some of the cast members have actually pursued higher education, this is not the selling point of the show. In fact, part of the appeal of the show is that the cast members are portrayed as intellectually inferior, which leads to the show being primarily considered a comedy. Any internet search about Jersey Shore will eventually lead you to websites touting their favorite "stupid" quotes mentioned by the cast, especially considering the cast's collective affinity for declaring invented statistics as factual, changing grammar, and asserting their obviously skewed logic as undistorted. In a scene where Snooki complains to the cast about her recent encounters with men, she claims, "Guys are douchebags and I hate them all. They don't know how to deal with women and I feel that's why the lesbian rate is going up in this country." In another famous Snooki quote, she advises the television audience, "Everybody Google it, because that's why the water is salty. Fucking whale sperm." Mike "The Situation," when explaining how he believed Sammi Sweetheart liked him, stated, "It's obvious that Sammi has a crush on me. It goes back to the days of prehistoric kindergarten" (Salsano 2009-12).

Though I have only cited quotes from two of the cast members, in reality, all of the cast could be quoted for the nonsensical things they have said or done on the show. Jersey Shore overall is renowned for its anti-intellectual aspects, with the media calling the show "contagiously stupid" (Shea 2011), and a study even accusing shows like the Jersey Shore of actually "dumbing down" its audiences, at least temporarily (Dooley 2011). This proves that

the flagrant portrayal of Italian Americans, especially over the past 30 years, while perhaps different in execution (Italian Americans not caring about going to college versus Italian Americans being outright unintelligent) has remained constant through the representations of guidos in the media.

#### E. Casual Sex and the Objectification of Women

The parallels between *Saturday Night Fever* and *Jersey Shore* with regards to sexuality are overwhelming. In both the movie and the television show, women are treated as a means to an end rather than human beings. Sex is casual and confronted as if it were a game, with the males of the *Jersey Shore* house in particular approaching sex as if the interaction had no physical, emotional, or mental consequences. In both *Saturday Night Fever* and *Jersey Shore*, women are viewed as a binary group: those who are willing to have casual sex and those who are not. When Annette, the “good girl” who spoke of hoping to be married soon tells Tony she has feelings for him, he rejects her for being too interested in a committed relationship and not wanting to have sex with him immediately. In desperation, Annette agrees that she will “make it” with him. Tony then pushes Annette to make a choice between being chaste or promiscuous because, in his mind, there is no “in between.” He asks, “Are you a nice girl or a cunt?” to which she replies, “Can’t I be both?”. Tony replies negatively, explaining, “No. It’s a decision a girl’s gotta make early in life, if she’s gonna be a nice girl or a cunt” (Badham 1977).

An eerily similar comment regarding the nature of women is also heard on the *Jersey Shore*. On the second season of the show, Vinny explains the two types of women he primarily encounters and classifies them into which are willing to have casual sex and which are not: “There’s some girls that are just gonna come here, strip off their clothes and jump in

the jacuzzi. Then there are some girls that are respectful, that you have to just actually treat like girls, human beings.” The classification of certain “types” of women does not end there, however, and as the males of the Jersey Shore house began to make certain phrases more common, the women of the house also began to use these classifications to describe other women as well. The two most common names for women are used to describe their physical appearances: a “land mine” is a thin, unattractive woman while a “grenade” is a heavy, unattractive woman (Salsano 2009-12). The typification of women through an assignment of sexual value is thus reinforced in both *Saturday Night Fever* and *Jersey Shore*. Because of this, the portrayals in both representations frames the guido--and more specifically, the male guidos--as sex-obsessed beings that systematically and consistently objectify females.

#### **VIII. Changes in the Guido Portrayal over Time**

While I noted several key differences between the show and the film in their portrayals within my research, the most poignant and prominent contrast between the film and the show is demonstrated through the tensions between ethnic authenticity and assimilation. In this chapter, I will be using Mary Waters’ parameters as marked in *Ethnic Options* to compare ideas of ethnic assimilation. According to Waters, the three factors which define the extent of one’s ethnic assimilation are: (A) perceptions of discrimination, (B) degree of residential segregation, and (C) intermarriage (1991). While I have found that these three elements also have slightly varying importances with regards to identifying assimilation in white ethnicities, I will also explain how my criteria for the first three aspects is revised from that of Waters. In my next chapter, I will discuss the flaws of these factors as the sole criteria for ethnic assimilation.

## A. Discrimination

In *Ethnic Options*, Waters measures assimilation to be partially determined by perceptions of discrimination, asking her respondents if they could report any discrimination or prejudice received now or in the past, with her coming to the conclusion, “there is little experience of discrimination among white ethnics today” (1990:95). Yet when she states this, what she is actually referring to is de jure discrimination, which is discrimination ordained by law. It is my belief, however, that the importance of studying and understanding de facto discrimination should not be understated. Thus, in my research I will be reviewing this “subtle” discrimination rather than the nearly-obsolete (in these portrayals, at least) de jure discrimination.

In addition to this, I do not believe that merely asking about discrimination is comprehensive enough in understanding the actual prejudice that could actually be experienced. In asking her respondents about their perceptions of discrimination, she is not gaining a comprehensive understanding of the ethnic experience. Discrimination is two-sided, and an ethnic group’s propensity to discriminate against another group of people is *just* as indicative of assimilation as one’s likelihood to be targeted for discrimination. Therefore, in my research I attempted to look at discrimination through both lenses.

Though both *Saturday Night Fever* and *Jersey Shore* portray Italian Americans in at least somewhat of an ethnic context, it is clear that discrimination has become much more diluted after *Saturday Night Fever*. The differences with regards to perceptions of discrimination is largely due in part to the actual time period in which the filming takes place. Many aspects of *Saturday Night Fever*, which was filmed in 1977, show much more outright discrimination with a focus directed towards out-groups. This discrimination is not merely blatant, however; the consequences of such discrimination are serious and violent.

In *Jersey Shore*, which started filming in 2009, discrimination is not necessarily directed towards specific races or ethnicities outside of the in-group. While there are some instances in which race or ethnicity is made an issue, the consequences of such comments are nowhere near as inflammatory. Rather, the discrimination I refer to usually regards whether one is Italian or not (instead of whether one is hispanic or black as exemplified in *Saturday Night Fever*). Thus, while discrimination is evident in both, the trajectory and power of the discrimination are completely diverse, with *Saturday Night Fever*'s form of discrimination being much more broadly-directed and serious in connotation; instead in *Jersey Shore*, discrimination is framed less extremely for the most part and only usually constructs these prejudices in an "Italian/not-Italian" format.

The most noteworthy and representative example of the type of discrimination I refer to in *Saturday Night Fever* is the volatile relationship between the Tony and his friends (who are Italian) and the Latinos. Throughout the entire film, Tony and his friends casually spit out racial epithets, and lines such as "If you put your dick in a spic, does it get bigger than a nigger?" are used as jokes which oftentimes lighten up the conversation and evoke laughs from friends in the group at the expense of other races. There is no subtlety in the relationship between the two groups; the tension between the hispanics and the Tony's group of friends is salient, with even Tony observing, "The spics dump on us, so we have to dump on them" (Badham 1977).

Yet the examples of discrimination within the film are not limited to merely words; when Gus, one of Tony's good friends, gets sent to the hospital after being attacked by a group of people while walking down the street, Tony and his friends retaliate after Gus blames the whole incident on the Barracudas (a hispanic gang). As a group, Tony and his friends crash Gus' car into the Barracuda hang-out and beat up some of the members of the

group. This violent act is a prime illustration of how racial and ethnic perceptions of discrimination eventually have serious consequences. While Tony eventually sees through his racism at the end of the film and recognizes that he was wrongfully awarded the contest prize based on his ethnicity rather than his talent, the fact that *everyone* else disagreed with his rationalization only proves that discrimination was still very much present in that environment.

In Jersey Shore, however, ethnic tensions between Italians and other groups of people are not nearly as extreme. One scenario in which an emphasis on not being Italian is evident is when a female brought home by Pauly D is eventually told to leave the house because she is not attractive enough to the rest of the housemates' standards. When the girl reacts negatively, Sammi yells in response that the girl does not "even look Italian," thus questioning what reason she has to be on their property in the first place. Sammi does not, however, make any assumptions or disparaging comments about what race or ethnicity the female actually is (Salsano 2009-12). While there are other examples of cast members being picked on by members of the public who recognize them for being on the television show, there are no other notable instances in which issues of ethnicity or race impede interactions within two separate groups of people, thus proving that in this aspect, the guidos portrayed in Jersey Shore are much more assimilated than those of Saturday Night Fever.

#### B. Degree of Residential Segregation

With reference to assimilation, the question of whether suburbanization has reduced ethnic ties is addressed, with Waters concluding:

Many [older respondents] reported growing up in an environment in which white ethnic groups and the difference between them were very important. This was

contrasted with the perception that their Silicon Valley or Philadelphia Main Line suburb was not the same. Ethnic differences were still important, but those most respondents referred to were among Asians, Hispanics, blacks, and whites.

(1990:99)

Here, Waters explains how assimilation is increased with suburbanization, specifically in locations with a mixture of races and ethnicities.

The entirety of *Saturday Night Fever* takes place in Bay Ridge and Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Both of these places are considered to have neighborhoods with strong ethnic ties. Where Tony lived was largely Italian American, thus probably being represented by the first sentence within the Waters citation, showing the significance in differences between ethnic groups. From this, I can discern that the guidos of *Saturday Night Fever* were not *as* assimilated in the sense of residential segregation as the guidos of *Jersey Shore*.

In *Jersey Shore*, the cast members are removed from their residences (all of them having lived in the suburbs with the exception of Ronnie, who is from the Bronx) to the popular shore town of Seaside Heights, New Jersey, and thus it is extremely difficult to determine how their experiences in suburbs may have influenced their assimilation. If I were to relate their residences to Waters' theory of assimilation, my conclusion would be that they have all assimilated because of suburbanization. However, my other findings suggest that in spite of their suburban backgrounds, the guidos as portrayed on *Jersey Shore* are not as assimilated as Waters' theory would have one believe.

### C. Intermarriage

According to *Ethnic Options*, "intermarriage is [...] a good indicator of changes in the nature and perception of ethnic boundaries" (Waters 1990:102). Since both *Saturday Night*

Fever and Jersey Shore deal with a younger age group, I have decided that I would look at interactions between different races rather than marriage.

Saturday Night Fever demonstrates no assimilation whatsoever: there are no instances in which Italian Americans interact sexually or amorously with members of a different ethnic or racial group. In contrast, members of the Jersey Shore house are much less interested in race or ethnicity, with the exception of Snooki who explicitly demands, “Whoever I have babies with has to be Italian” (Salsano 2009-12)--and even this is an example of inter-racial/ethnic relationships since she is Chilean. Additionally, it seems as though many of the cast members show a preference *for* interracial and inter-ethnic relationships. Vinny explains his preference for Dominican females: Dominican girls are hot ‘cause they can dance, they can move, they got tans, they got big butts, nice full lips, they got that flavor an Italian guy needs.” (Salsano 2009-12). In another instance of inter-ethnic relations, Pauly D attempts to have a sexual encounter with an Israeli female (although in the end he believes that she is a stalker). These interactions are exemplary of the fact that while ethnicity and race are *acknowledged*, this does not mean that they necessarily impede interracial or inter-ethnic relationships. In some cases, differences in ethnicity or race can actually prove to be positive for the guidos of Jersey Shore.

## **IX. Analysis of Waters’ Assimilation Criteria**

Though *Ethnic Options* is renowned for its use of the three listed factors to measure assimilation, with these factors alone I came to the conclusion that for the major part, the guidos of Jersey Shore were portrayed as being much more assimilated than the guidos of Saturday Night Fever. However, I did not feel that this conclusion necessarily justified the reality of the representations of the guidos in Jersey Shore. The characters on the show, by



those three criteria, are limited: if assimilation could truly be judged solely on these three characteristics, then why are guidos still considered a subculture in spite of characteristics that deem them an assimilated group? This led me to investigate what other changes have made guidos so particularly notable as Italian American figures in popular culture. Through my research, I have determined that there are a number of other factors which I believe that she leaves out which could contribute in determining one's assimilation (including religious ties, changing dynamic of the family unit, and language/accents, all of which could be placed under the larger umbrella of "the continuation of ethnic-cultural practices"). It is thus my conclusion that Waters does not look at ethnic assimilation as comprehensively as is necessary.

#### A. Ethnic Authenticity & the Argument for the Nostalgia Complex

While Waters does not use this as part of her criteria, she does make certain claims about the continuation of cultural practices:

People have to construct the image of what it means to be Italian or Polish or Irish from the characteristics of their family, what they believe to be ethnic, or from a cultural grab bag of Irish, Polish, or Italian stereotypical traits.  
(1990:115)

In *Saturday Night Fever*, it is obvious that Tony is Italian based on the stereotypical image by which he is represented: his typically Italian name, his Brooklyn residence, his food throughout the film, his deliberate segregation from other groups of people (such as blacks and latinos), his family's Catholic religion, and even his (and his friend's) use of Sicilian dialect all serve as hints pointing towards his Italian ethnicity. While some of these aspects, like his geography, are not directly cultural, for the most part we are able to determine his

ethnicity through stereotypically-Italian cultural cues throughout the film. Tony Manero never tells someone directly that he is Italian; instead, through his actions, habits, and background the audience is able to understand and frame his ethnicity around his character (Badham 1977).

On the other hand, the exact opposite is true in Jersey Shore. From the beginning, the word Italian is flaunted as a label, and almost every cast member seems as though he or she has to prove his or her “Italianness” to the show’s audience. While it becomes obvious throughout the seasons that the members of Jersey Shore do not know much about Italian culture at all, in spite of this, many of them continue to flaunt their Italian Americanness almost as if it were a badge of honor. Says Pauly D, “I was born and raised a guido. It’s being Italian, it’s representing,” yet when the cast goes to Florence, Italy, in the fourth season, he admits, “I’m nervous, I’m not gonna lie. I don’t know what gyms are like over there, I don’t know what tanning’s like, I don’t know the food, and the language--I don’t even speak Italian” (Still 2011). The rest of the cast is just as clueless about Italy as Pauly is, with their ignorance of Italian culture becoming apparent the more time they spend in Florence (which many Italians consider to be one of the most touristy and culturally-diluted cities in Italy). Ronnie misidentifies *Il Duomo* of Florence as the Sistine Chapel famously painted by Michelangelo, stating to the rest of the cast, “Vatican, that’s the one that Leonardo DiVinci painted with his hand” (Salsano 2009-12).

What accounts for this huge paradox? While I cannot declare with absolute certainty, my analysis leads me to identify a phenomenon that seems to be prevalent the more an ethnicity grows further detached from its first-generation immigrant ancestors that I call the Nostalgia Complex. This is when people within certain ethnic groups are taught through their family to have pride in their heritage and their ancestors, but do not have a true grasp of the

many dimensions and aspects of that culture. A certain nostalgia for the past being a “better” time is instilled within the offspring, leading that person to try to over-compensate for their lack of not being first-generation, or “truly authentic.” Thus, the third-, fourth-, or even fifth-generation descendent holds on very strongly to the customs passed down from their parents and family, whether they are ethnic traditions or even invented traditions<sup>2</sup>. The phenomenon is thus reactionary. With a nostalgia complex, the person believes that it is necessary to preserve, continue, and represent the “superior” customs and ways of the past. They feel it is a moral obligation to represent everything that his or her family has been through (perhaps why the guidos of Jersey Shore insist on being identified as Italian on a consistent basis). The effect is thus reactionary, and through interactions with family when one realizes they are not nearly as authentic as their progenitors, one tries to validate their authenticity by holding on to everything that they *do* know about their family’s past. While this may not entirely account for the guidos of Jersey Shore’s inability to completely assimilate, I do believe that the nostalgia complex certainly plays an influential role.

## **X. Conclusion**

To summarize, the first question of my research was to understand how the Italian American guido subculture was characterized through the media with reference to Saturday Night Fever and Jersey Shore. I found that both the movie and the show perpetuated portrayals of the guido as: fixated on the club lifestyle, with certain types of dancing helping to segregate guidos from “inferior” non-guidos; reckless and prone to substance abuse and destructiveness; overly focused on aesthetics, preferring superficiality over expanding one’s

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<sup>2</sup> EJ Hobsbawm defines this term in his book, *The Invention of Tradition*: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a virtual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable past.” (1983:3)

knowledge of Italian American culture; opposed to learning and incapable of intelligent thought or speech; and likely to treat sexual intercourse as a casual and consequence-free interaction while classifying women based solely on their sexuality and physical appearances in the process.

My second objective was to try to understand how the portrayals of guidos have changed over time, and I used the parameters as detailed in Mary Waters' *Ethnic Options* to understand to what extent Jersey Shore has assimilated in comparison to Saturday Night Fever. I found that the guidos as portrayed in Jersey Shore were much more assimilated than those in Saturday Night Fever with regards to discrimination, suburbanization, and intermarriage.

This realization helped me to answer my third question, which was: does Mary Waters' theory correlate with the findings in my research? What I found was that Mary Waters' elements for assimilation were not comprehensive, and that in order to understand to what extent a group has assimilated more completely, it would be important to investigate how people construct self-images of their ethnic identity and heritage. Looking at Jersey Shore, I tried to comprehend the dynamics of the guido paradox: an Italian American who flaunts his or her ethnicity while being unaware of even simple concepts, facts, or traditions within the culture. I argue that the nostalgia complex plays an important part in explaining this identity conundrum.

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