

Being Ethnic:

3rd Generation Italian Identity in Vancouver

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Executive Summary

This project was the result of a partnership between the Institute for Diaspora Research & Engagement, and the Italian Cultural Centre of Vancouver (ICC). It had a dual objective. First, to understand the relationship young Italian Canadians have with their cultural heritage. The Institute is interested in the study of diaspora populations, defined as a group of people who leave their country of origin and reside elsewhere, while retaining some type of connection or sense of affiliation with their country of origin. This type of connection is often strongest in first generation immigrants, who may have family ties and engage in practices such as sending remittances. However, the longer an immigrant community has been established in a new country, the more distant the ties to the country of origin are likely to become. The second generation is typically less connected to the original country, but this may not be true of the third. There was some evidence of an increased interest in Italian culture amongst the third generation in Vancouver. This study attempts to investigate this, and understand the reasons underlying the phenomenon. By isolating third generation Italian Canadians (those whose grandparents came from Italy), this study takes a snapshot of the evolution of a community, and the extent to which it retains a diaspora connection.

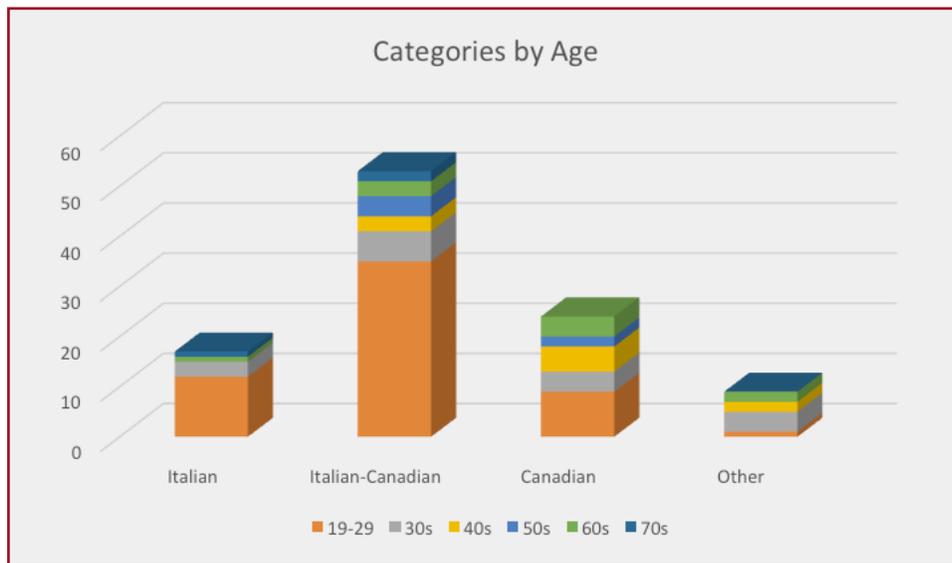
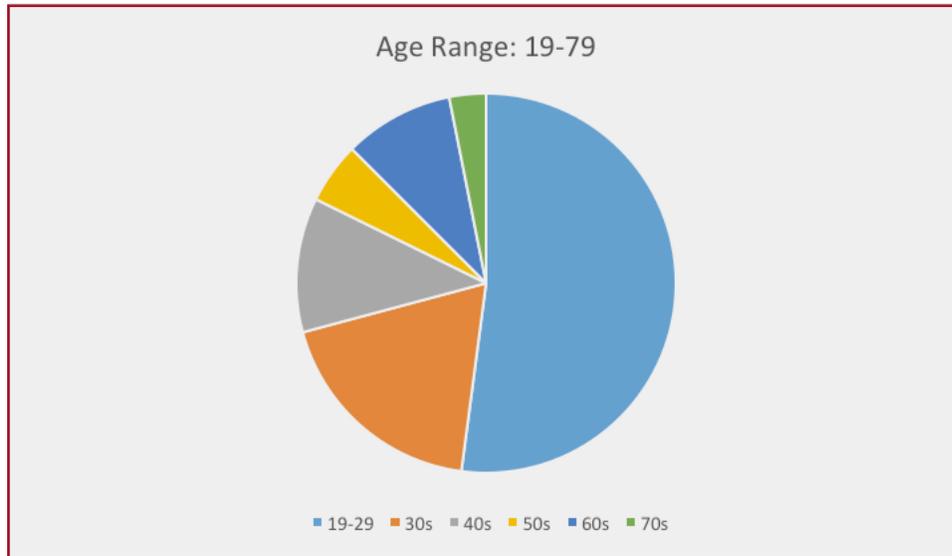
The second objective of the study emerges from this. Identifying the changing needs and characteristics of the third generation provides direction to institutions developed to serve the Italian community. The Italian Community Centre (ICC) was originally founded in 1977 by thirteen distinct Italian Associations in order to “promote Italian culture, values, and heritage, and to share these with other communities”. It now offers a variety of services including language classes, cultural events, catering, event facilities, a museum, and social space. The challenge for the ICC (also known as Il Centro) is to stay in touch with the needs of the emerging generation of Italian Canadians, whose interest in and understanding of Italian culture is likely to be distinct from that of their parents and grandparents. This situation is not unique to the Italian community; there are several other cultural community centers in Vancouver that are also seeking to renew themselves in order to stay relevant.

We received a total of 104 responses, in the period May 2014—October 2014.

The study took the form of an online survey, which participants accessed from their own computers. It consisted of thirty questions, designed to identify the ways 3rd generation members described themselves, and any practices they engaged in which reinforced their connection to their Italian heritage. In order to understand which behaviours

might contribute to maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity, answers have been grouped in four categories, determined by the way in which participants described themselves. The options they were

given on the survey were: Italian, Italian-Canadian, Canadian, or Other. Participants are identified only by this description, and a number — Italian Canadian 41, for example.



SURVEY OBJECTIVES

After grouping participants by self-description, the remainder of the questions in the survey were designed to examine the factors that might be responsible for strengthening or weakening an individual's sense of Italian identity. The areas investigated were ongoing connection to Italy (through communication or travel), language use, social practices, and perception of how Italians are viewed in Canada. There were also questions about the meaning and importance of Italian heritage, and how it might be preserved.

RESULTS

There was overwhelming agreement among participants (88%) that Italian identity was important, and something that they wished to preserve and pass on to their children. This was interesting, because many of them reported that their parents had not taught them the language, and some had parents who had been reluctant to instill a strong sense of culture. The third generation seems to be more interested in maintaining this link.

55% spoke Italian, while 35% spoke little but had family who did. Language was seen as a key vehicle for cultural transmission and retaining a connection to their heritage. Similarly, visits to or contact with Italy was something that 93% of individuals reported.

Most had visited or planned to, and many had existing family connections. The experience of visiting Italy did not have the same effect on everyone: some felt their sense of Italian identity strengthen, while others found that being there highlighted differences, revealing how Canadian they were.

When participants were asked to explain what being Italian meant to them, the most common response was the importance of food and family. It was also a source of uniqueness— a way of distinguishing themselves from everyone else. This identity was not seen as in competition with being Canadian; rather, it was an additional strand in an individual's identity — an added richness.

Religion, specifically Roman Catholic Christianity, was described by 75% of participants as an important part of Italian identity. However, its importance lay in the form of traditions like baptism, or holidays like La Befana Day. Most participants had attended church and received religious instruction as children, but few retained a personal sense of conviction. Being a “lapsed Catholic” was the most common position. While religion continues to inflect the traditions and practices of Italian culture, faith was not something that characterised the majority of responses in this survey.

Difference

We asked participants to tell us how different they felt from other

Canadians, due to their ethnic roots. Of all participants, 61% said they felt distinct, while the rest said they did not feel different. Curiously, both groups pointed to the same fact to justify their answers: Canada's multicultural society. The fact that the country is made up of so many different immigrant (and indigenous) groups means that it may lack a strong sense of unified cultural practices. However, it was this very fact of Canada being made up of various ethno-cultural groups that was itself seen as a source of common ground.

"I feel as though there isn't actually one distinct "Canadian" culture, and we are all made up of our own cultures. I feel distinct as an Italian because we have traditions and values that are not shared by all Canadians. I feel like our ties to family are different than other Canadians, for example"
(Italian-Canadian 43).

"I feel the same as other Canadians. I live in a place surrounded by immigrants and their descendants. I see great similarities between our experiences"
(Italian-Canadian 9).

What these responses indicate is a larger sense of who and what we are as a country. As a nation of immigrants, we belong to smaller ethnic groups, but share the larger experience of being Canadians. Various immigrant communities have their own particular stories of what drove them to leave their original

countries and arrive here, but it is this very experience of departure and arrival in family history that so many of us share. Contrary to the fear of fragmentation, it is this very thing that may be a central part of national identity and communal solidarity.

Participants were also asked how they thought Italians were viewed in Canada. This question was designed to test whether there was a connection between the idea that Italian culture was positively viewed in Canada, and an individual's own willingness to be associated with it. Surprisingly, while 64% thought Italians were positively viewed, and 34% thought the image was mixed, these opinions were spread fairly evenly across categories. Those who thought Italians had a great image in Canada were not concentrated in the groups who self-described as "Italian" or "Italian-Canadian".

Preserving Identity

Finally, participants were asked what activities they thought might assist in preserving Italian identity. Among the comments that were repeated throughout our survey were the importance of language, tradition, food, and social gatherings. The family was central to these individuals as the first social circle and the means through which values and traditions — not to mention food— were passed down. Being able to speak the language was seen as critical to retaining a connection with the country and culture of Italy.

The Italian Cultural Centre of Vancouver (also known as Il Centro) is currently looking at ways to reach out and engage the third generation of the community. The language classes it offers are already an area of growing interest. Among the other activities requested by participants were cooking classes and social activities specifically designed for people under 40. There was also some interest in getting help accessing genealogical records and building family trees.

The sense of connection to Italy can be expected to change and diminish over time, as a community ages past the memory of the first generation who left. It seems the elements that last the longest are food, with all the memories it carries, and values. A certain way of doing things, the importance placed on growing your own vegetables, or gathering the family around the table for a meal,

these are the things that seem to endure.

Looking Ahead

This study was a relatively small snapshot of Vancouver's Italian community. It would be useful to look at Italian populations in other parts of Canada, to see whether a similar interest is evident in the third generation there. Another area for future research is to compare third generation Italians in Canada with the third generation of other immigrant communities. What part of the identity retrieval urge is common to third generation diaspora members, and which features are distinctively Italian? These are all areas for further investigation. However, the diaspora experience is surely something that many of us can relate to, in this country of immigrants. Much of this story will resonate with our own experiences of preserving family traditions and identity, Italian or not.

Introduction

This project was the result of a partnership between the Institute for Diaspora Research & Engagement (IDRE), and the Italian Cultural Centre of Vancouver (ICC). It had a dual objective. First, to understand the relationship young Italian Canadians have with their cultural heritage. The Institute is interested in the study of diaspora populations, which are defined as a group of people who leave their country of origin and reside in another country, while retaining some type of connection or sense of affiliation with their country of origin. This type of connection is often strongest in first generation immigrants, who may have family ties, and engage in practices such as sending remittances. However, to make a general statement, the longer an immigrant community has been established in a new country, the more distant the ties to the country of origin are likely to become. There was some evidence of an increased interest in Italian culture amongst the third generation in Vancouver, in the form of rising enrolment in language classes at the ICC. A new Italian Cultural Centre recently opened in Seattle, and there are anecdotal reports of Italian communities in Montreal and Toronto experiencing a surge in demand for language classes as well. Further, other studies have been done in Australia¹, tracking a similar pattern of cultural reclamation among 3rd generation Italians. This study attempts to

investigate this in Vancouver, and understand the reasons underlying the phenomenon. By isolating third generation Italian Canadians (those whose grandparents came from Italy), this study takes a snapshot of the evolution of a community, and the extent to which it retains a diaspora connection.

The second objective of the study emerges from this. Identifying the changing needs and characteristics of the third generation provides direction to institutions developed to serve the Italian community. The Italian Community Centre (ICC) was originally founded in 1977 by thirteen distinct Italian Associations in order to “promote Italian culture, values, and heritage, and to share these with other communities”. It now offers a variety of services including language classes, cultural events, catering, event facilities, a museum, and social space. The challenge for the ICC (also known as Il Centro) is to stay in touch with the needs of the emerging generation of Italian Canadians, whose interest in and understanding of Italian culture is likely to be distinct from that of their parents and grandparents. This situation is not unique to the Italian community; there are several other cultural community centers in Vancouver that are also seeking to renew themselves in order to stay relevant.

We received a total of 104 responses, in

¹ See Chiro, Giancarlo (2008). “Evaluations of cultural identity in the personal narratives of a group of Tertiary students of Italian ancestry in Australia.” *Flinders University Online Language Group Online Review*, Vol 3, Issue 3, November. pp.1-14.

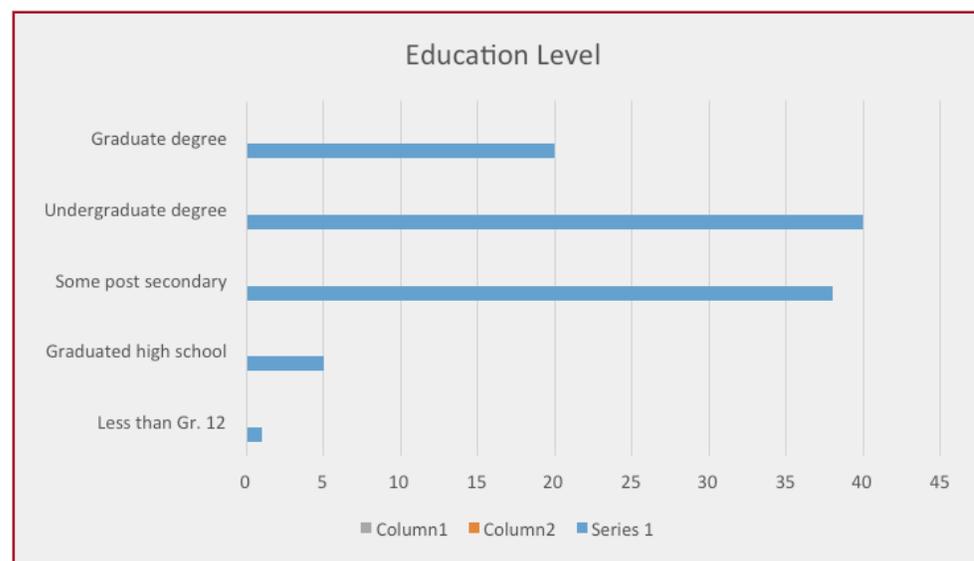
the period May 2014–October 1 2014. The survey was publicised through the ICC and IDRE websites, on social media, on flyers distributed to Italian businesses, and through radio and newspaper interviews. In the week that the survey was covered in the media (July 7–11) there was a sudden surge of responses, which doubled the existing figure.

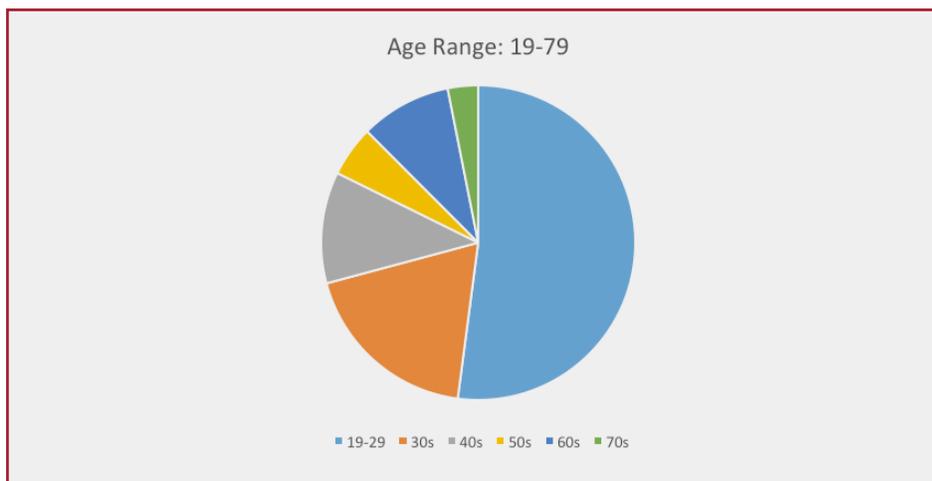
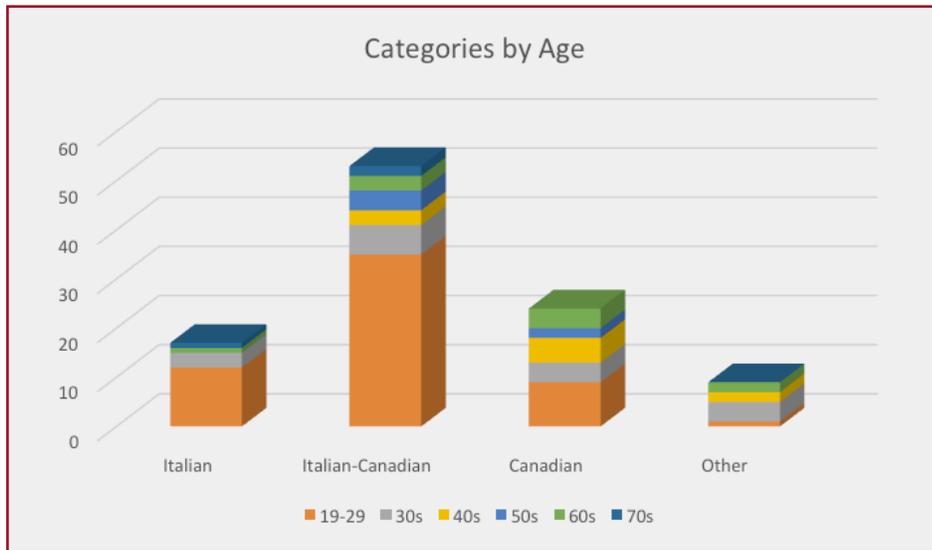
The study took the form of an online survey, which participants accessed from their own computers. It consisted of thirty questions, designed to identify the ways 3rd generation members described themselves, and any practices they engaged in which reinforced their connection to their Italian heritage. Participants were self-selecting, because they heard about the study through one of several channels, and voluntarily went online to fill out the survey. We did not select a sample to ensure coverage of age, education, or gender. However, the information participants supplied about themselves (illustrated below) indicates

that we have a fairly diverse group.

In order to understand which behaviours might contribute to maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity, answers have been grouped in four categories, determined by the way in which participants described themselves. The options they were given on the survey were: Italian, Italian–Canadian, Canadian, or Other (please specify). Participants are identified only by this description, and a number— Italian Canadian 41, for example. This system allowed us to track the responses of particular individuals throughout the survey, while preserving the anonymity of participants.

Survey respondents were grouped by self-description, since we are primarily interested in the other common traits correlated with these descriptions, and whether any of them influence an individual's description of identity. Of the 104 responses, individuals grouped themselves as follows: Italians 17, Italian–Canadians 54, Canadians 24,





Other 9. One interesting factor in analyzing these groups is whether certain age groups dominate one category or another. For example, are people under 30 more likely to identify as Italian-Canadian? Or do other age brackets make up a majority of responses in other description categories? This would indicate whether a desire for cultural identity

might be more common among individuals in a certain age group. The chart indicates that while people under 30 make up a significant percentage of the Italian and Italian-Canadian groups (at 70.6% and 64.8% respectively) those describing themselves as Canadian are more likely to be 30 or over, with only 37.5% younger.

Self-Identification

ITALIANS

Participants were asked to explain why they had chosen to describe themselves in one of these four categories. The Italian category was obviously the group which expressed the strongest connection to ethno-cultural identity. In explaining this self-description, individuals gave answers like *“I describe myself as Italian because that is my culture...”* (Italian 5), or *“Because it is my heritage. Everyone is a Canadian”* (Italian 13). One telling remark was an explanation of what identity questions are perceived to mean: *“When people ask what you are, they’re asking about your heritage and your background. I wasn’t born in Italy, but my family is Italian so I am Italian”* (Italian 3). This reflects the understanding that within Canada at least, questions about identity are understood to be a reference to ethnic or cultural roots, the things that make us different.

ITALIAN-CANADIANS

The Italian-Canadian category was by far the largest, as more than 50% of participants chose this description of themselves. One of the themes that came up in many answers was the sense of Italian identity as a distinguishing characteristic — a sense of uniqueness. As one participant put it, *“I identify myself as an Italian Canadian because I come from an Italian heritage but was born in Canada. Emphasizing myself as Italian allows me to distinguish myself, creating a sense of identity in a society that is diverse”* (Italian-Canadian 13). This supports the idea that one reason for the interest in cultural heritage that seems common amongst 3rd generation Italian immigrants is that it is a way of standing out within the larger Canadian context. The fact that this description is influenced by social context is supported by the fact that when traveling in Italy or elsewhere, the Canadian description of identity may become more prominent. This may be because the intention of the

“I feel that I am a Canadian by birth, but my family and social life is highly influenced by Italian culture. It also depends on where I am asked. If someone asks me “what is your nationality” and I am in Canada, I normally reply with ‘Italian’. However, when I am in Italy or somewhere else in the world and someone asks me the same question, I normally reply with ‘Canadian’”

(Italian-Canadian 15).

question is understood as citizenship, when one travels abroad, or it may be because the context in which one wishes to define one's identity is different. The shared citizenship and culture of Canada, of which they partake, is more important than being distinct within that society.

For many participants, the hyphenated "Italian-Canadian" label captured the double nature of their sense of themselves as connected to two countries. This response was quite typical: *"Both sides of my family are from Italy which gives me a strong connection to being Italian. Being Canadian born, I love this country also"* (Italian-Canadian 39). The sense of connection to Italy was a function of culture: values, traditions, food, and language that individuals had been exposed to through their families.

CANADIANS

The "Canadian" category was the second largest, though it was half the size of the "Italian-Canadian" group. There were three main reasons people gave for using this description of themselves. The first was citizenship: *"Because I was born and raised in Canada"* (Canadian 13). These individuals were likely to say they had Italian heritage, but thought that citizenship was the primary factor in identity — in contrast to individuals who identified as "Italian"

or "Italian-Canadian" because they saw culture as a more significant feature. A second reason was the idea that "Italian-Canadian" properly applied only to more recent arrivals: *"I was born in Canada, and therefore, by birth, I am Canadian. The title 'Italian-Canadian' I feel should be given to the first generation (of Italian-Canadians)"* (Canadian 2). The third main reason for choosing this description was a sense of distance from Italian ancestry. As one individual put it,

"I don't 'feel' Italian. My mother was Italian and tried to 'blend in' with other kids when their family moved to Canada. She was embarrassed of how Italian her parents were, so she distanced herself from her heritage and did not pass down her Italian heritage to myself or my brother"

[Canadian 10].

OTHER

Those who identified as "Other" did so mainly because they saw themselves as culturally mixed. They had an Italian connection, but saw Canadian culture, or another ethnic connection (such as Acadian or Aboriginal, for example) as being a significant part of their identity also.

Survey Objectives

After grouping participants by self-description, the remainder of the questions in the survey were designed to examine the factors that might be responsible for strengthening or weakening an individual's sense of Italian identity. The areas investigated were ongoing connection to Italy (through

communication or travel), language use, social practices, and perception of how Italians are viewed in Canada. There were also questions about the meaning and importance of Italian heritage, and how it might be preserved. These questions will be dealt with at the end of the report.

Connections to Italy

Regular contact with Italy seems to be a strong factor influencing a person's sense of Italian identity. 88% of self-identified Italians and 100% of Italian-Canadians had existing family connections to Italy, and/or had traveled there. Family connections were either relatives who still lived in Italy, with whom they remained in contact, or family members in Canada who traveled back to Italy regularly. Many participants had traveled to Italy personally, even if they had no remaining connection to relatives in that country. This was also true of 87% of Canadians and 77% of Others.

Where the difference emerged was in how visiting Italy affected individuals. One type of response was a very positive sense of connection. This was both with the history of their grandparents who

had lived in that country, and also a sense of where their own family traditions and manners had originated. This is often described as a sense of "coming home". As one respondent said, *"it felt very familiar and somewhat of a homecoming. It has strengthened my Italian identity, although Italy today is not the same place my grandparents left"* (Italian-Canadian 9). *"I felt like I was 'home'. Kind of hard to explain"* (Canadian 11). Many individuals reporting this type of positive experience also expressed a desire to learn the language, and even live in Italy for a period of time.

However, while visiting Italy can reinforce a sense of cultural connection, it can also expose differences. For other individuals, the experience was mixed in this way.

“It actually furthered my Canadian identity. I realized that in terms of everyday life, I am a tried and true Canadian. However, I still felt a strong connection to my Italian roots” (Italian-Canadian 7).

mentioning that the experience also highlighted their Canadian-ness— or difference. All but one of the Others who had visited also reported that the experience strengthened their Italian connection.

“I always thought of myself as Italian, but not so much when I went back to Italy. Here in Canada, the Italian immigrants have a sort of Italian-Canadian hybrid culture. Not quite fully Italian and not quite fully Canadian. It is a mix of both cultures, and that becomes very apparent to me when I visit Italy”

(Italian-Canadian 6).

Interestingly, those who identified as Canadian were more likely to have had a more distant feeling when visiting Italy. *“It didn’t really affect me, it just made me more aware of what life is like in Italy”* (Canadian 7). In fact, 33% of responses in this category were of this type. Responses like this one were not found among those who described themselves as Italian or Italian-Canadian. Of the Italians who had visited Italy, all reported strong positive reactions. Among Italian- Canadians, 90% reported similar reactions, with only 9%

These two types of responses are, of course, not particular to Italian emigrants. Members of other diaspora communities have comparable reactions to visiting the country their parents or grandparents originated from. The double sense of both recognition and alienation, foreignness and belonging, is part of the diaspora identity. They are at once inside outsiders in their new country, and outside insiders in the land of their forebearers.

Language and Family

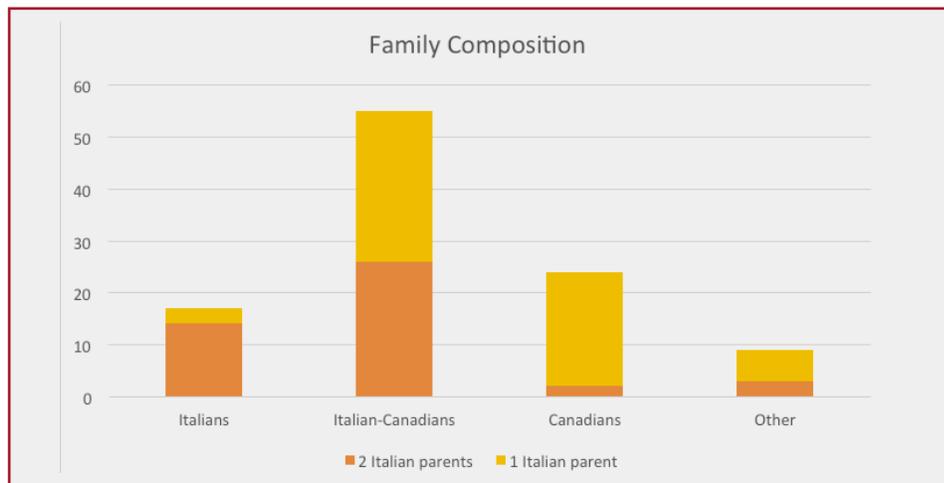
This study was in part, sparked by the observation that there was new interest in learning Italian amongst the 3rd generation in Vancouver. The Italian Cultural Centre (ICC) offers language classes, and the new enrolment attracted the attention of the Centre's Director, Mauro Vescera. A new Italian Cultural Centre recently opened in Seattle, and there are anecdotal reports of Italian communities in Montreal and Toronto experiencing a surge in demand as well. It was an early clue that there might be an emerging interest in cultural identity in this demographic. Participants were asked to indicate if they spoke and/or wrote the language, what regional variety they used, whom they spoke it with, and whether anyone else in their family spoke Italian.

Participants were also asked if both parents were of Italian descent. Here a very interesting pattern emerged in their answers. For this question, if the respondent indicated that there were Italian connections in both father and mother, they were included in the "Yes" category, even if there were other ethnic ingredients. For example, respondent Other 2 said "Father is full, Mother is half". Since this means that both parents have an Italian connection, rather than Italian being associated with only one side of the family, we classified this response as "Yes". Perhaps unsurprisingly, of those in the Italian category almost all had Italian on both

sides of the family. Self-described Canadians were almost all from homes where only one parent was Italian. There was no obvious difference in results based on the gender of the Italian parent. So far, so predictable. It seems obvious that when the cultural heritage is transmitted through both parents, the child would have a stronger sense of it. What was harder to explain were the results in the Italian-Canadian category. It was divided almost evenly between participants who had two Italian parents, and those who did not. What was it that caused these individuals with only one Italian parent to identify more strongly with their Italian heritage, while so many others from comparable homes chose to identify as Canadian? Clearly having two Italian parents alone is not enough to explain the data.

One trend that emerged in the answers was the effect of inter-marriage with non-Italians. Without exception, this seemed to dilute the sense of Italian identity, not only for the children of such marriages, but even for the Italian spouse. See for example the responses of two individuals who described themselves as Canadian:

"I associate it [Italian identity] mainly with my early childhood, when I spent a lot of time at my grandmother's house and with my cousins in East Vancouver. I have great

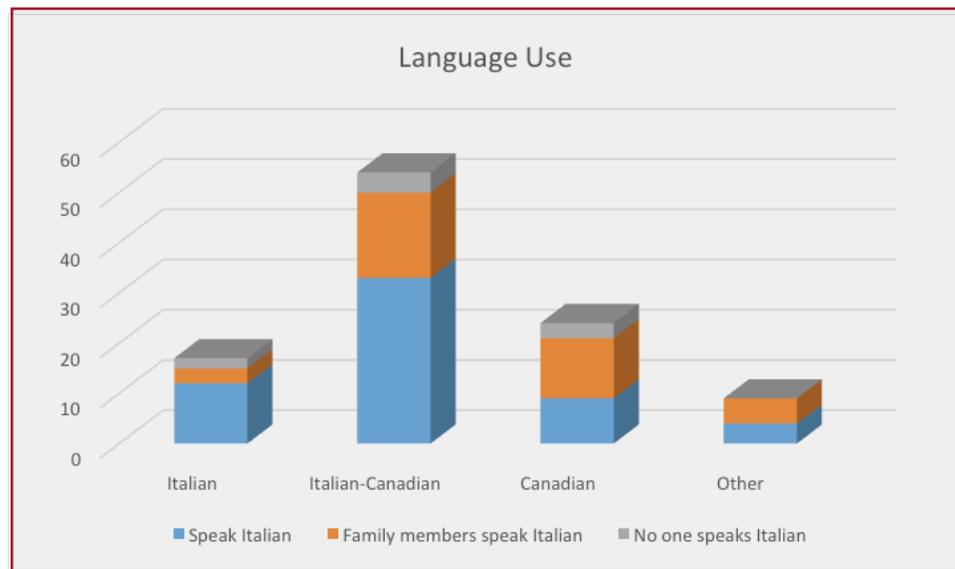


memories of lunches at my Nonna's house (always with Mio home delivery orange soda!), shopping at Tosi's, and going to Whitecap's games in the '70s. Now, perhaps because I generally use my very Anglo-sounding married name, I don't feel significantly Italian. My daughter identifies my father as Italian, but does not think of me or herself as such" (Canadian 22).

"... I am only half Italian, as my mother married a British-Canadian. I don't feel like I have any identity at all. Am I Italian like my mother, or British Canadian like my father?" (Canadian 11)

One possible answer to why children with only one Italian parent might retain a stronger sense of the culture was language use. If Italian was spoken in the home, a child might have a more

tangible connection to Italian identity. However, the answers participants gave do not clearly support this idea. Among Italians, 70% spoke Italian, and 17% could not, but had family members who did. The Italian-Canadian and Canadian groups were quite similar in their answers: 31% of Italian Canadians did not speak the language but had family who could. The same was true for 50% of Canadians. While the number of Italian-Canadians who spoke the language themselves was much higher than among the Canadians — 61% vs 37%, this is only slightly higher than the number of Italian-Canadians who had two Italian parents. It fails to explain the significant number of Italian-Canadians who had only one Italian parent, and could not personally speak the language, but retained a stronger Italian affiliation than their Canadian counterparts.



The Meaning of Italian Identity

All of the participants in this study had some Italian ancestry, regardless of how they chose to describe themselves. As third generation immigrants, they were removed some way from the country and culture of their grandparents. What Italian identity now meant to them was a central question. They were also asked what aspects of the culture they most relate to, and to what extent they thought religion played a role in that heritage.

This question was one of the most pivotal in the study, as we tried to understand how

participants relate to their Italian roots.

Recurring themes were a sense of pride, and “a connection to something larger than me. It means being connected to people who understand some of the essence of who I am and WHY I am the way I am” (Other 9). This larger sense of community was grounded in both cultural practices and historical memory. For many participants, it was the recent history of their grandparents’ migration to Canada to start a new life, and the courage it took to leave all that they knew and build a new life from scratch, with few resources.

“It means a strong love of family, a great love of food, wine and music, a strong work ethic. It gives me a sense of pride for the journey my grandparents went on to give me the life I have today”
(Italian Canadian 16).

However, the sense of history frequently stretched much farther back, to include the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and the scope of art and culture produced over the centuries. Italian identity, for these individuals, meant a personal link to a very long civilizational narrative, with its high and low points.

This sense of membership in another community was also seen by some as a way to preserve a unique identity within mainstream Canadian society. “*It really means a connection to my roots. It’s also a minor way of differentiating myself within the larger Canadian society*” (Canadian 21). This diasporic identity was not seen as a contest with Canadian identity, but rather, an additional richness—another strand of identity interwoven with being Canadian.

Food and the pre-eminent importance of family were very popular responses, and some participants asserted that these two priorities reinforced each other. “*It means being close to your family and doing anything for them. And believing that good food really does bring people closer together*” (Italian 7).

Among those who identified strongly with their Italian heritage (no matter how they chose to describe themselves), a relationship with grandparents was frequently mentioned. In some cases it was an appreciation for their grandparents’ passage from the “Old Country” to the new, but often it was the memory of “*lunches at Nonna’s house*” (Canadian 22) or “*Nonno’s garden*” (Italian 14) that were significant in embedding an appreciation of food and family as Italian identity.

² Nonna and Nonno are Italian words for Grandmother and Grandfather.

Religion

Question 21: Do you view religion as part of the Italian identity? To what extent is it part of your identity?

This question attempted to ascertain the extent of religious affiliation in diaspora Italians. It was assumed that most of their grandparents, the first generation immigrants, would have had a strong sense of religion—Roman Catholic Christianity, to be specific—at least as part of their educational and cultural background, if not as a matter of

personal conviction. The extent to which this aspect of Italian culture was retained in the third generation, in a predominantly secular Canadian context, was what we hoped to discover.

The answers supported the initial assumption about first generation connections to Roman Catholicism. Many participants attributed the religious exposure in their lives to the influence of their grandparents. As one respondent put it, “*Religion was a strong element of a traditional Italian culture that*

was at the centre of life in the hamlets from which pre and post war immigrants originate from. It is part of my identity only through childhood memories of my grandparents and step grandparents” (Italian 17).

Of the self-described "Italians", 82% affirmed the importance of Catholicism to Italian identity. Among Italian-Canadians, 77% agreed that religion had a significant influence on Italian culture and traditions. 54% Canadians agreed, as did all those describing themselves as Other. This means that a total of 75% of all participants thought Catholicism was a significant part of Italian identity.

answers which distinguished between personal non-belief, and religion as part of family traditions. See for example these responses:

“...yes. The Catholic Church is inescapable. I don’t practice, but I will baptize my son—it’s intertwined with family traditions” (Italian-Canadian 19).

“Religion was important to my family as I was growing up. I am not religious as an adult but I still celebrate the religious holidays as social and cultural events that connect me with my heritage” (Italian-Canadian 9).

“Very much so. I was raised as a Catholic and although I’m no longer religious I still consider myself a Catholic. It’s a cultural thing— I don’t think you need to believe in it to be affected by it. As Italians, much of the shorthand we use revolves around the church, and it’s as much a part of our culture as anything else. There’s really no escaping it”

(Other, 2)

What was interesting about these answers was that when individuals said “No”, they often seemed to have interpreted the question as asking about their personal faith or religious belief. For example, some responded by saying “I am an atheist” (Italian 7), or “No, religion is not important to me” (Italian-Canadian 2). This is a legitimate response, insofar as these individuals personally identify with Italian culture but feel religion is not a necessary part of it. However, it leaves open the possibility that if they understood the question to be about Italians in general, they might have answered differently. There were a significant number of

One trend which surfaced in the responses was that most participants had received some exposure to Roman Catholicism through family traditions such as baptism, and often attendance in church, catechism class, or Catholic school. However, many described themselves as “lapsed” or non-practicing adults. There was, as a result, familiarity with Catholic practices, and even an embedding of these in family events, but not necessarily a personal identification with the religion. What emerged was that for many 3rd generation Italians, religion is a matter of cultural practice, not personal conviction.

One possible explanation for this is that these individuals were born and raised in Canada, where institutional religion has little public profile, and belief is largely a private affair. Some answers hinted that this social context influenced behaviour as early as the first generation.

“I do not view religion as part of the Italian identity, however, many people in Italy do. No one in my family is very religious. My grandparents grew up in very Roman Catholic families back in Italy, but since moving to Canada have had very little involvement in religion. They are more spiritual/superstitious, and do not attend mass, save for the occasional baptism, wedding, or funeral” (Canadian 16).

It seems that relocating to a country in which the social structure did not reinforce religious practice had a rapid effect on behaviour for the first generation in this family. Other responses indicated that the first generation retained more of a connection to religious practice, but this was not passed down as strongly to the second and third generation.

“Most Italians I know including myself have grown up with Catholic traditions but do not continue to follow them once they enter their late teen years. Probably due to Vancouver’s large non-religious population” (Italian-Canadian 26).

The lack of religious identification amongst diaspora Italians in Vancouver may be a form of acculturation: identifying as Catholic is not only a mark of difference from the secular mainstream, it may be perceived as a negative form of difference. This pattern may not hold for other parts of Canada, of course. Food and family, the other strong markers of Italian identity described by participants are seen as distinctive, but these are markers that are proudly affirmed. It would be useful to compare this pattern of relationship to religion with other diasporic communities that come to Canada from countries in which religion is a more public strand of cultural identity.

Perhaps the most telling reflection of how people viewed religion was that, when asked what parts of Italian culture they personally related to the most, the overwhelming response was food and family. Despite the fact that 75% of participants had earlier agreed that religion was part of Italian identity, it was not frequently mentioned in response to this question. Religion, along with sport, art, or other additional items, was a minority response. In other words, there is a recognition of the historical importance of Catholicism, which continues to be felt in certain rituals and holidays, but it is no longer something that many people personally espouse.

Social Perception of Italian Identity

This question was designed to test how participants think they are perceived, as a cultural or ethnic group, in Canada. Of course, the answers are themselves only the perceptions of the participants, and may not be an accurate reflection of how they are actually viewed. The point of the question was to examine whether there was a link between positive ideas about social perception, and an individual's own tendency to embrace Italian identity. After all, if one believed that such an identity was negatively perceived, it might affect one's willingness to actively associate with it. What emerged from the responses, somewhat surprisingly, was that there was no clear link between positive notions of social perception, and the strength of an individual's Italian affiliation.

Responses were analysed and labeled as one of four categories. "Positive", "negative", "mixed", or "unsure". Of course, these are rough divisions, and some answers might legitimately be counted in one category rather than another. The responses, and the labels they have been assigned are available in the Appendix.

A "positive" response was one which listed only favorable characteristics, or included no clearly unfavorable ones. For example, relatively neutral descriptions such as "loud" or

"passionate" might be mentioned in a positive response, along with clearly positive ones like "good food" and "strong family values". A "negative" response listed only unfavorable characteristics, such as "*lazy, slimy, and sly*" (Other 7). When a participant expressed a lot of uncertainty, the response was labelled "unsure".

Most interesting was the "mixed" category of responses. These answers typically referenced stereotypes, especially images popularised in TV shows like "Jersey Shore" "Real Housewives of New Jersey" and "The Sopranos", or films like "The Godfather". Others alluded to these stereotypes by mentioning the assumption that all Italians are associated with the mafia. Without exception, individuals who mentioned these images complained that they gave an inaccurate and extremely negative portrayal of Italians, which affected how the entire ethnicity was perceived. However, these responses also mentioned other well-known stereotypes with more positive connotations, such as "good cooks". In a few cases, responses in this category simply stated that Canadians had incomplete knowledge of Italians, because it was based on stereotypes.

Only 5.8 % of responses mentioned shows or films by name, and a total

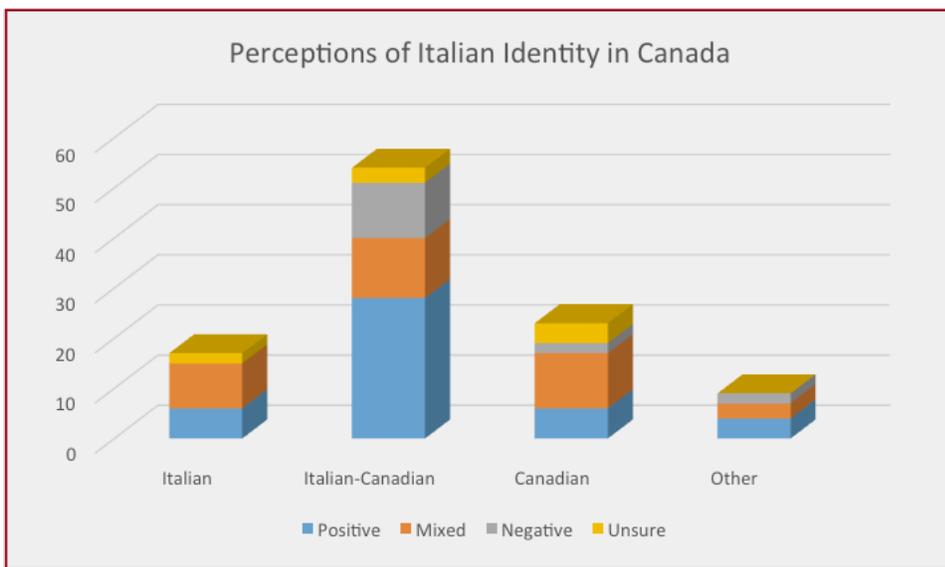
of 10.6 % that mentioned the mafia, either through a show or directly. However, while this indicates some awareness of negative stereotypes, the overall results reveal a sense of confidence.

The “Positive” category was the largest, at 42% of all responses. The “Mixed” category came second, at 33%. “Negative” perceptions accounted for a mere 14.4%, and “Unsure” responses comprised just over 8%.

As the chart clearly shows, those who thought Italians had a great image in Canada were not concentrated in the groups who self-described as “Italian” or “Italian-Canadian”. There is a higher percentage of positive

responses in the Italian-Canadian group, but the same group also contains a larger percentage of negative responses. It appears that perceptions of Italian image in Canada do not have an obvious effect on self-identification.

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Difference

Question 24: Do you, as someone of Italian descent, feel different/distinct from other Canadians? How and why?

This question was intended to measure the extent to which Italian identity made an individual feel distinct from other Canadians. Also, we were looking at whether the strength of Italian affiliation, (in other words, those who self-identified primarily as Italian) made people feel more distinct. The results were fascinating. There were a total of 40 negative responses, and 64 positive ones, which means that 61% of participants perceived themselves as different in some way from other Canadians.

The reasons people gave for the positive or negative answer revealed very interesting patterns. Amongst those who said they felt different, two reasons were most frequently cited: food and family. Food was a relatively small source of difference; typically individuals said they had a “*distinct love of food*” (Italian-Canadian 50) or that they ate “*way better food*” (Italian-Canadian 15) than other Canadians. More significant was the mention of family. Strong family ties, and the priority of spending social time with family before friends were cited as differences in attitude that made

Italians quite distinct. However, the two indicators were often linked, as many individuals said that strong family bonds were cultivated through food, at regular family dinners.

The negative responses were even more interesting. Some said that there was no distinct Canadian culture to feel different from. As one participant put it “*Canadian culture is multicultural with no serious distinct Canadian culture*” (Italian 5). In fact, even those who gave positive responses to this question cited similar sentiments: “*I feel we are all different. Canada is very multicultural*” (Italian-Canadian 3). It bears noting here that Canada was not always perceived this way. The robustly Anglo-Saxon culture of the nineteenth century persisted into the 1950s, recorded by another Vancouverite, the poet Earle Birney in “Anglo-Saxon Street”. Indeed, this environment may account for the reported reluctance of some second generation Italians to pass on language and other distinctively Italian traits.

This relatively recent perception of Canadian culture as composed of difference, and lacking a deep set of values and traditions, is precisely what critics³ of multiculturalism fear. One might wonder if it is this very openness that encourages

people to emphasize their ethnic and cultural difference, rather than rooting themselves in a Canadian civic identity. However, the “mosaic” of Canadian society, composed of many immigrant groups, was itself a source of civic solidarity.

When explaining why they did not feel different from other Canadians, individuals frequently said that they saw themselves as just one cultural group among a nation of immigrant groups. Paradoxically, this very same idea was cited by those who said they did feel distinct. Here is a sample of the most detailed responses on this matter, both positive and negative.

“No because I feel that all of my friends and co-workers are from their own different and distinct cultures” (Canadian 14).

“We are all different and the same. Canadians with different heritages. I work with the Polish community who are proud to be Canadian and proud to have a Polish heritage. I enjoy listening to how proud they feel to be from a Polish background. I hope they feel the same towards me” (Canadian 16).

“I feel as though there isn’t actually one distinct “Canadian” culture, and we are all made up of our own cultures. I feel distinct as an Italian because we have traditions and values that are not shared by all Canadians. I feel like our ties to family are different than other Canadians, for example”
(Italian- Canadian 43).

“I feel the same as other Canadians. I live in a place surrounded by immigrants and their descendants. I see great similarities between our experiences”
(Italian-Canadian 9).

What these responses indicate is a larger sense of who and what we are as a country. As a nation of immigrants, we belong to smaller ethnic groups, but share the larger experience of being Canadians. Various immigrant communities have their own particular stories of what drove them to leave their original countries and arrive here, but it is this very experience of departure and arrival in family history that so many of us share. Contrary to the fear of fragmentation, it is this very thing that may be a central part of national identity and communal solidarity.

“I feel like almost all Canadians have some ancestry based in emigration and immigration. Even First Nations peoples have been extremely displaced because of the Canadian government. Because of this, I feel more a part of Canadian culture. I am descended from immigrants, like many here, and it helps me find solidarity with my fellow Canadians”

(Italian-Canadian 48).

³See for example Bissoon-dath, Neil. (2002) *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, and Malik, Kenan. (2006) “The Failures of Multiculturalism” in *The Secular State and Islam in Europe*, Ed. Kurt Almquist. Engelsberg: Ax:son Johnson Foundation.

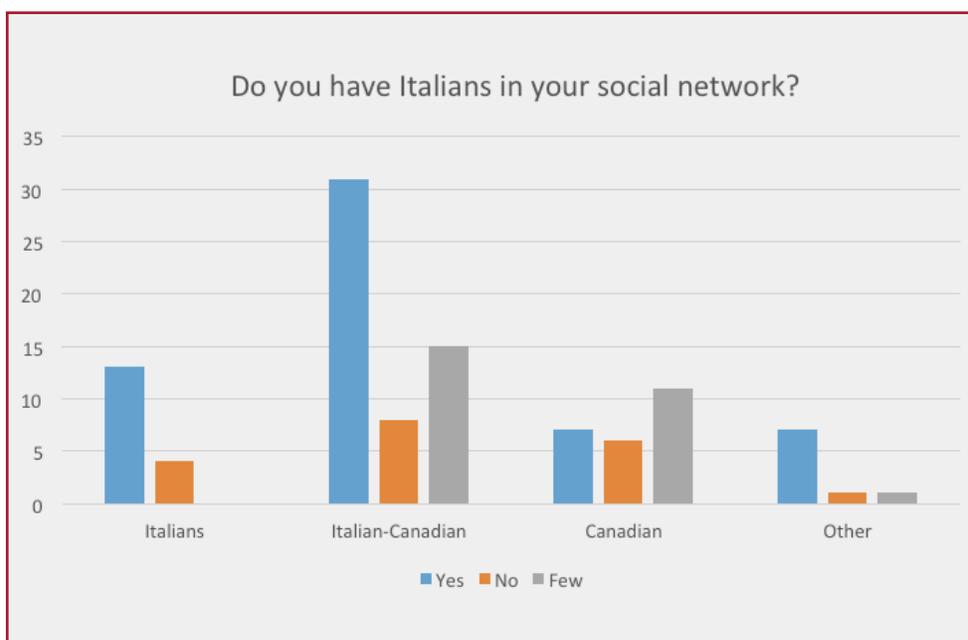
Social Bonds

In understanding what behaviours are linked to a strong sense of cultural identity, participants were asked a series of questions designed to examine their social connections. The questions related to business, friendships, and attending Italian themed events.

Question 25: Do you have any Italians in your social network? How did you meet them? Is this important to you? Why?

This question was intended to test whether a robust sense of Italian identity was connected to patterns of socialising. Do people who hang

out with other Italians have a stronger sense of their cultural heritage? Who tends to place importance on having other Italians to socialise with? Answers were categorised as (Y) for those who had social Italian contacts, (N) for those who said they did not, or (F) for those who had very few, or only family. In addition, responses may have been given a second letter, either Y or N, for those who expressed a clear opinion about the importance—or lack thereof—of having Italian friends. So a response coded (Y/N) would be someone who has social contacts, but does not think this is particularly valuable.



In general, answers followed the pattern we predicted. Most of those in the Italian group (76%) had Italian friends. Among Italian Canadians,

positive responses were a majority (57%), while 27% had a few or only family, and only 14% said they had none. The Canadian category had a

much lower positive response rate, at only 29%, with 45% saying they had a few, or family only. The Other category tracked closer to the Italian group, as they did in most other questions, at a 77% positive response rate.

In terms of how much individuals valued having Italian friends, all the Italians, with one exception, placed importance on this. For Italian-Canadians, the results were much more mixed. Among those who had social contacts, many did not think this was very important, while others did. Similarly, among the ones who reported few or none, some thought it was quite important and wished they had Italians in their network.

“I have a couple of Italian friends that I met through mutual friends. It is not important to me, as a good friend is all that matters, not what their background is”
(Italian-Canadian 53).

“I really don’t, apart from the ones I see at the banquets. It’s not very important, but I would LOVE to have Italian friends”
(Italian-Canadian 3).

Unsurprisingly, the Canadians, who as a category had the weakest connection to Italian heritage throughout the survey, placed less importance on this.

“No, it’s not important. No one cares”
(Canadian 3).

“Outside of my family, no I personally do not. My father’s generation had more of a

social network with other Italians. No, this is not important to me. I don’t choose my friends based on their ethnicity”
(Canadian 20).

It seems clear that there is some correlation between an individual’s sense of cultural identity and their social patterns. In general, those with a strong connection to their Italian heritage are more likely to have Italians in their social networks. However, it is unclear which side of this equation causes the other. Does being in regular contact with other Italians strengthen a personal sense of Italian identity, or are those people with a strong sense of cultural belonging more likely to attend activities and social gatherings where other Italians are present? The answer is unlikely to be one side or the other. The two are probably mutually reinforcing. Someone with a strong Italian family culture is more likely to attend a Catholic school or soccer event, and when s/he meets other Italians there, the sense of shared identity would be reinforced.

Many individuals throughout the survey indicated that the family is a primary source of social contact, and comes before friends. It was also their main connection to cultural heritage and traditions, more than peer groups. Maintaining contact with extended family—including in Italy—was a priority and provided an ongoing link with the country and its language.

Several participants commented that their parents’ and grandparents’

generation seemed to have more robust Italian networks.

“I don’t have many Italians in my social network. I’d say my parents and grandparents have many Italian friends through their Italian Centre and through their church. I’d really like to have a bigger Italian network but I’m not sure where I would find people my age. It would really be nice to have a social meeting place with other Italian Canadians”
(Italian-Canadian 46).

Some of this might be explained by church attendance, which has declined in the third generation. However there are other sources of social connection, such as the various Italian societies and associations in Vancouver, which were started and supported by these earlier generations. One possible explanation for this may be that patterns of ethnic networking are related to a sense of vulnerability or “otherness”, common to new immigrant communities. Arriving with few economic resources, language gaps, and some sense of homesickness, first generation immigrants may be more likely to seek each other out, and even settle in the same neighborhoods. Shared language, holidays, food, and even economic support would be among the benefits of this pattern of association. The second generation would benefit from this clustering among their parents’ generation, meeting many of their children as a result. However, as a community becomes less distinct, more economically successful, and more

“mainstream”, the more immediate need for an ethno-cultural community would diminish. This hypothesis could be tested by comparing the social patterns of the Italian community to other immigrant communities of similar age. However, there is still a desire for cultural identity among third generation Italians in Vancouver. Perhaps this is rooted in the more basic human need for belonging and community, which persists even when economic vulnerability and language or cultural difference are no longer challenges.

Question 26: Would you be more likely to patronize a business if it were run or owned by Italians?

This question was part of a series of questions designed to test how much third generation Italians seek out other Italians, for business, cultural activities, and friendships. It would seem intuitive that a pattern of regular contact with other Italians would reinforce a sense of Italian identity. With regard to patronising Italian businesses, some Italians (58%) and Italian Canadians (38%) indicated an interest in doing so. Those who described themselves as Canadians were much less likely to— at only 25%. There were three categories we used to label responses: “Yes”, “No”, and “Conditional”. The “Yes” category were responses that clearly indicated a willingness to seek out Italian businesses, or at least that they would be more interested in a business if it were run by Italians. The “No” category requires little explanation,

and many of these responses thought the very premise of the question was distasteful. They stressed that good business was what mattered, not who own or ran it. However the “Conditional” category was quite interesting. These were people who generally would not seek out Italian businesses except in certain circumstances; these circumstances were usually the desire to eat Italian food. Many of these respondents said that while in general they would not be specifically interested in Italian run businesses, bakeries, delis, and restaurants were an exception. This indicates that food remains one of the strongest links to cultural identity, bound up as it is with family, tradition, and memory. It may in fact be among the last markers, surviving most others.

Question 28: Do you participate in other Italian-themed events? Which ones?

The results here confirmed our working hypothesis. We expected that individuals who strongly identified as Italian would be more involved in Italian-specific events. This was clear, with 82.3% of Italians and 79.6% of Italian-Canadians reporting attending such events. By contrast, only 41.6% of Canadians did. Eight of the nine individuals in the “Other” category also reported

participation, with only one answering in the negative.

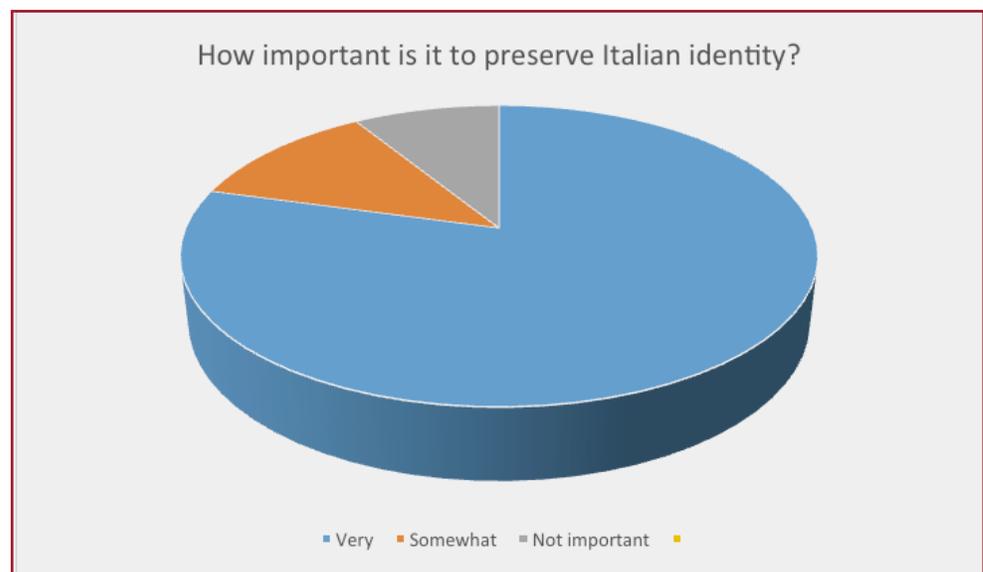
Italian Day on the Drive was the most frequently mentioned activity, followed by watching soccer in Italian cafes, and events at the Italian Cultural Centre. Multiple events, not counting stores, cafes, and restaurants, were listed by 29% of Italians, and 40% of Italian Canadians, but only 12% of Canadians, and 11% of the Others. Five individuals were actually involved in organising cultural activities, and unsurprisingly, they were three Italians and two Italian-Canadians. This pattern of responses confirms that strong cultural affiliation is connected to participation in cultural events. However, the answers do not indicate whether people participate in events because they already a strong connection to their Italian heritage, or whether that connection is at least in part fostered by regular participation. At the very least, it seems safe to conclude that regular involvement in cultural activities would strengthen a connection to Italian identity. In this respect, organising activities—whether of the private social variety, such as picnics and banquets, or more public events, like concerts and festivals—is a key part of nurturing a cultural community. The Italian Cultural Centre is already active in doing this, and will have to find ways to ensure that the younger generation is engaged, in order to ensure they have a sense of belonging.

Preserving Italian Identity

Question 20: To what extent do you feel it is important to preserve your Italian identity? Please comment on any particular activities or practices you think are useful in doing this, and whether you engage in any of them yourself.

The extent to which individuals were interested in preserving their identity was a central area of interest in this report, as one of the hypotheses was that 3rd generation Italian-Canadians have a stronger interest in cultural activities and identity preservation than perhaps their parents did. In general, the results supported this notion. Only

9 (8.6%) of participants indicated they thought preserving Italian identity was unimportant. 12 (11.5%) thought that it was somewhat important. Answers in this category displayed an interest in maintaining some parts of what had been passed down to them, such as family values, which did not necessarily require Italian cultural labeling. Others wished to pass the heritage on to children, but were unsure of how to do this. The rest of the participants 80 (76.9%) expressed strong agreement with the idea that preserving Italian identity was important. Among the methods they mentioned were food, social gatherings, and language.



Food was a vehicle for maintaining a link, not only to Italian culture in general, but family traditions in particular. “Nonna’s pasta sauce” or

holiday baking were foods that individuals wanted to be able to create for themselves and their children. The link between food and

memory is double. Not only does cooking like grandma preserve her memory for the adult grandchild, serving that food provides an opportunity to tell children about the family members who first came to Canada from Italy, and discuss the cultural link with that country.

Social gatherings were primarily about maintaining ties with family members, and then with other Italians. Events organised by the Italian Cultural Centre were specifically mentioned, along with Italian Day, underlining the importance of larger opportunities for Italians to meet and mingle as a community.

Language was perhaps the most fascinating response. It was the most commonly cited way of preserving identity, with many individuals mentioning that they took lessons as adults, out of a specific desire to master the language. This suggests that speaking Italian was not a specific goal their second generation parents had for them, supporting the idea that second generation diaspora are in general not overly interested in cultural preservation and transmission.

“I think it is important. I share stories of our family with my children so they have a sense of where they came from. I am doing a family tree again to share their history with them. Learning the language is

important to me and I would like to master it, even if only at the conversational level. Crotchet-ing was taught to me by my grandmother and I want to pass that on to my grandchildren. Travelling in Italy with my son and sharing memories of his grandparents and great-grandparents. It is part of who I am, how I view life and its meaning” (Italian-Canadian 30).

“It is mostly important in that I want my kids to have the same sense of belonging as I did. While I am Canadian and I love Canada, it was always nice to have another sense of culture and ties to a different tradition. I wish my parents taught me the language from birth, and I feel it would be a great thing to preserve the language for my children. I also hope to pass along my citizenship to allow them to have the extra opportunities that come with an EU citizenship. To be short — the importance of preserving my citizenship mainly lies with my future children” (Italian-Canadian 32).

“My Nonno passed away a few years ago and my Nonna is not getting any younger. I would hate to see their traditions die with them. Even learning the language would preserve the memory of being Italian so I can pass it on to my children and their children, and so on. I do not want to see such a rich culture disperse because the people who grew up in Italy are all gone. I want to learn and perfect my Nonna’s sauce, I want to be able to teach my kids and then their kids. There has to be a way to keep the memories alive. I appreciate the opportunities I have in Canada and living in such an amazing country allows me to keep my Italian roots alive” (Italian-Canadian 42).

The Italian Cultural Centre

Among the comments that were repeated in responses to our survey were the importance of language, tradition, food, and social gatherings in preserving Italian identity. While participants described themselves in different ways, all four groups showed a strong interest in retaining a connection to their Italian heritage. In fact, many of them, including self-described “Canadians”, mentioned they were taking Italian classes, or getting Italian citizenship. This indicates an area of potential for Vancouver’s Italian Cultural Centre (ICC). To get more specific detail, participants were asked whether they had attended any events or classes there, and what events would interest them.

One thing that emerged from many responses was the perception that the ICC was primarily for parents and grandparents (the first and second generation). They requested more events engaging people in their teens through thirties. The types of activities suggested fall into several broad categories:

1) History. This included help with family trees and access to

genealogical records.

2) Travel. Arranged trips to various parts of Italy, with local connections and billeting.

3) Social. These events should be targeted at the under 40 demographic. Networking events, cooking classes, banquets, concerts, and films were all suggested.

In other parts of the survey, individuals mentioned the ICC specifically as important for its language classes and social events. The challenge for the Centre is to continue serving the first and second generation, whose interests are different, while finding ways to appeal to the third. On one hand, they are more integrated, socially and culturally, into Canadian culture than their parents and grandparents. On the other, they have an active interest in re-connecting with their cultural heritage, though they may not share their parents’ interest in certain films, activities, or music that they regard as dated. Since food was one of the most consistently mentioned touchstones of identity, activities centered around it may have strong potential.

Looking Ahead

This study was a relatively small snapshot of Vancouver's Italian community. It would be useful to look at Italian populations in other parts of Canada, to see whether a similar interest is evident in the third generation there. Another area for future research is to compare third generation Italians in Canada with the third generation of other immigrant communities. What part of the identity retrieval urge is common to third generation diaspora members, and which features are distinctively Italian?

What similar challenges might other cultural community centres be facing? How does the role of a cultural community centre evolve to serve the changing needs of an increasingly integrated population? What are the surviving markers of cultural identities, and how are they retained? These are all areas for further investigation. However, the diaspora experience is surely something that many of us can relate to, in this country of immigrants. Much of this story will resonate with our own experiences of preserving family traditions and identity, Italian or not.

Afterword

The raw survey responses which form the basis for this report are available in a separate appendix. Participants remain anonymous, and are identified only by category and number. Those interested in viewing these responses are advised to contact the author or the IDRE

directly. The author gratefully acknowledges the input of Dr. James Busumtwi-Sam and Dr. Stefano Gulmanelli. While the author benefitted from the comments and suggestions of other readers, she is solely responsible for the content of this report.

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions

Research Questions

- 1) n/a
- 2) Age:
- 3) Neighborhood (please provide only the street you live on, and one cross street, not the full address):
- 4) Education level:
 - a) partial high school
 - b) high school complete
 - c) some post secondary
 - d) undergraduate degree
 - e) post graduate degree
- 5) Employment:
Self:
Father:
Mother:
- 6) Are both your parents Italian?
- 7) How do you describe yourself:
 - a) Italian
 - b) Italian-Canadian
 - c) Canadian
 - d) Other (please specify: _____)
- 8) If your answer to the previous question was “other”, please specify.
- 9) Why do you describe yourself that way in your answer to question 7?
- 10) How long has your family been in Canada? When did they arrive and where did they go?
- 11) Why did they leave Italy?
- 12) What connection do you (or other family members) have with Italy (e.g Travel, education, business, ongoing family ties, other).
- 13) Have you ever visited Italy?
- 14) If so, how did this affect your sense of identity?
- 15) Do you speak and/or write Italian?
- 16) If you speak/write Italian, please specify if it is:
 - a) standard Italian,
 - b) some regional variety (Specify which one: _____)
 - c) a mixture of Italian and English words,

- 17) Please specify which region variety if that was your previous answer.
- 18) Where do you use the language?
- 19) Who else in your family speaks Italian? (Specify standard or regional variety)
- 20) What does Italian identity mean to you?
- 21) Do you view religion as part of Italian identity? To what extent is it part of your identity?
- 22) What aspects of Italian culture do you most relate to?
- 23) How do you think other Canadians perceive Italians and Italian culture?
- 24) Do you, as someone of Italian descent, feel different/distinct from other Canadians? How and why?
- 25) Do you have many Italians in your social network? How did you meet them? Is this important to you? Why?
- 26) Would you be more likely to patronize a business if it were run or owned by Italians?
- 27) Have you ever attended an event or class at Il Centro? Which ones? Do you know anyone who has?
- 28) Do you participate in other Italian-themed events? Which ones? (e.g. Italian Day on Commercial Drive, other)
- 29) What types of events, services, or other activities would be of interest to you if offered at Il Centro?
- 30) To what extent do you feel it is important to preserve your Italian identity? Please comment on any particular activities or practices you think are useful in doing this, and whether you engage in any of them yourself. Please include any other reflections on growing up in Canada as a person with Italian descent, and what this means to you.

Thank you for completing this survey. If you have any questions about the research, or if you decide, after submitting your responses, that you wish to withdraw from the study, email the research team at diaspora@sfu.ca indicating that you want your survey responses to be deleted from the study files. Participants may withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact.

Complaints or concerns should be addressed to the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, Dr. Jeff Toward, jtoward@sfu.ca, 778-782-6593.