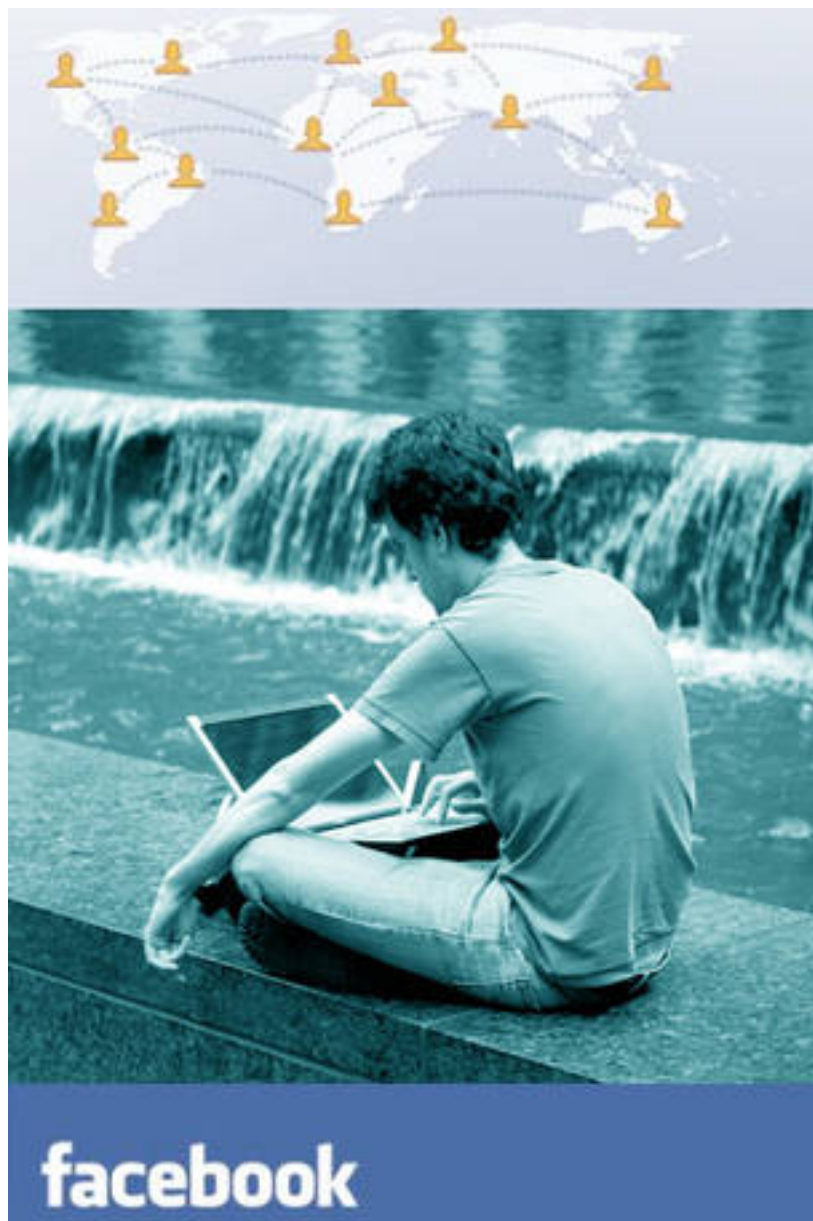


Italianità on Facebook

by Jana Vizmuller-Zocco & Roberta Iannacito-Provenzano (October 18, 2008)



Nowadays several Facebook groups focus on the theme of Italian Culture. In which way they can be considered adequate testimonials of "Italianità"?



Given that the generation of young people born in North America who are now between 18 and 25 year of age is technically savvy and enjoys the activities offered by programs available on the web, the question arises as to the manner in which “Italianità” is reflected in those [Facebook](#) [2] groups which have as their focus matters that the creators have identified as “Italian”. Our research takes into consideration those Facebook groups which have been created by US college and Canadian university students who are children or grandchildren of Italian immigrants or children of mixed-marriages where one parent is of Italian extraction.

There are hundreds of groups (some with thousands of members) dealing with aspects of Italianità. The group’s title clearly identifies its focus. This may be “national” or “local”/ “paese”: Being ITALIAN Just Simply Amazing; I am SICILIAN...not Italian...get it right!!; Abruzzese and PROUD, Half-Italians, Villa San Michele; or manner of being raised and cultural traditions: I used to get botte when I was small, I love fettini, The world according to nonna, etc. There are at least three significant observations that stem from our research:

1. Young North Americans of Italian background self-define themselves as Italian. What connection to Italy is shown by the Facebook groups creators who were not born in Italy? Why do individuals of second, third and subsequent generations self-identify as Italian? According to the straight-line assimilation theory, each generation of immigrants feels less and less ethnic and lives and acts more and more like the host society; this path also presents “detours” that Markus Lee Hansen alluded to: “the third generation wants to remember what the second generation tried to forget”. The analysis of the data collected from Facebook groups with Italian content shows clearly that the assimilation theory is insufficient to understand the creation of ethnoculture as practiced on the Web 2.0 today. Specifically, neither Hansen’s hypothesis, nor [Richard Alba](#) [3]’s European American ethnicity, nor [Herbert Gans](#) [4]’ symbolic ethnicity can account for the connection that young people of Italian background have with Italy today. Their attitude is often tongue-in-cheek, but it does not prevent them from creating their own Italy or their own Delia: they are not dependent on the idea of a “paradise from which they are excluded” (as [Robert Orsi](#) [5] put it): they choose to retain those aspects of ethnicity with which they have a direct experience. Clearly, nonni are an integral part of this picture, just as some variety of Italian or dialect belongs to the mix. And this is true whether the group has been created by a young person born in Canada or the US. Therefore, cognitive ethnicity and creative ethnicity proceed hand-in-hand in general in North America, and with most probability in other countries with Italian immigration as well.

2. The meaning of the term “Italian” relies on the knowledge of aspects of modern Italy as well as familiar traditions common to North American Italians. The fact itself that all the second- and third-generation individuals (Canadian or US-born) who participate in Facebook groups call themselves Italian requires some analysis and explanation. In Italian, there are two terms each indicating a different perspective of one’s connection to Italy: italiano and italico. Even though the political and social definition of italiano is by no means without problems, it is generally used with the meaning of someone born in Italy whose parents were also born in Italy; italico is anyone born outside of Italy with parents/grandparents born in Italy. This distinction is made in English in some research on children and grandchildren of immigrants to North America (see [Monica Stellin](#) [6]’s title of part one of her edited book: “Italicity” in Canadian Media), but it has not entered the common vocabulary of speakers of English. Therefore, “Italian” is the umbrella term for every individual who has an ancestral connection to Italy, however near or distant. This attitude and the subsequent fusion of referents of “Italian” is also supported, in part, by the political decision to grant citizenship to the descendant of emigrants (in Italy, since 1992).

3. The third stage in ethnic development is creative ethnicity. It must be emphasized that the individuals who created the descriptions of these groups were not concerned with negotiating their ethnicity in a socio-economic world, nor were they forced or led by a capitalist system to choose the words they used, nor are they concerned with integration. It is most likely that the individuals who created the groups’ descriptions and those who join these groups as the time passes attempt to understand themselves and their background in a particular way which is not symbolic but cognitive. There is therefore a third possibility in the evolution of ethnicity, that is, cognitive ethnicity (after the stage of 1. twilight, and 2. symbolic ethnicities). Cognitive ethnicity indicates a strong desire to articulate (by verbal and visual means) one’s



background, family characteristics, preferences in food, clothing, trips, and communicate this understanding or the lack of it to others, and all of this is possible through the medium of the Web. Technology allows to understand one's position vis-à-vis ethno-cultural concerns in a more holistic perspective shared by others of the same background and age-group.

It remains to be seen not only whether these groups will stay active and continue to grow, but also whether they will acquire some type of social relevance and concomitant political action (for ex., in the direction of a different type of teaching of the Italian language and culture). It is notable that the connection to Italy is very strongly felt and demonstrated: through pictures, mention of parents' or grandparents' birthplace, through interest in gastronomy of a town or region, through (last) names. No mention is made of the immigrant experience, the tragedies and difficulties of integration: the personal familial experiences are shared but with a view to Italy rather than to Canada or the US.

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[2] <http://www.facebook.com>

[3] <http://www.albany.edu/sociology/socweb/Directory/alba.htm%20>

[4] http://c250.columbia.edu/c250_celebrates/your_columbians/herbert_gans.html

[5] <http://www.religion.northwestern.edu/faculty/orsi.html%20>

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