

Guidos on MTV: Tangled Up in the Feedback Loop

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Why has MTV produced a youth culture reality show that showcases Guido and Italian identity? Guido offers a symbol that specifically identifies the brand; Italian ethnicity makes the brand more salient. Guido combines a commodified youth party culture with a style that has street culture roots. [...] Guido is a struggle for recognition and respect by an age fraction that privileges consumption rather than formal education, reflecting class differences in an ethnic culture that continues to evolve in metropolitan New York City and throughout the Northeast. [...] Youth may turn more to ethnicity to authenticate their cool and preserve privileged insider status as in Hip Hop. However, this is denied by a vocal anti-defamation position that reduces Guido to a category of ethnic prejudice. It is my view that this slights a vernacular Italian American culture that ironically is better defined as a challenge to generalizations and stereotypes that underpin historic ethnic slurs.



This is the unabridged text of the essay presented by Professor Donald Tricarico at the colloquium on "Guyido: An Italian American Youth Style" sponsored by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (CUNY) on January 21st.

Social identities are problematic because they are transacted by individuals and groups with disparate interests and resources. Guido has emerged as a highly contested identity now that it is being transacted in the wider public discourse. The [MTV reality show](#) [2] [Jersey Shore](#) [2] demonstrates the power of the corporate media to shape discourse in the popular culture. Global companies like [Nike](#) [3] and MTV "sell cool" to young people. Malcolm Gladwell has pointed out that marketing strategies "hunt" for trends that are "cool" - styles created by young people like skateboarding and rapping over dance music records. Appropriation for sale to a mass youth market accelerates what Gladwell characterizes as a "feedback loop" that transforms initial statements which were hardly invented in a pop culture vacuum.

My research career has focused on Italian American vernacular culture in New York City. The first installment was a study of an Italian American neighborhood in Greenwich Village where my mother's side of the family settled before 1900 and where I was born and baptized (at [St. Anthony's of Padua on Sullivan Street](#) [4]). My focus was the adaptation of ethnic community to the city beyond institutions forged during the initial immigrant settlement. Since the late 1980s I have paid close attention to the relationship between Italian ethnicity and youth popular culture identified with Guido. Guido was itself organically connected to local Italian neighborhood culture especially in the outer boroughs and appeared to be meaningful as an adaptation of ethnicity to the city and the larger culture at a particular historical juncture.

It is my hypothesis that Guido is fundamentally a form of "youth agency", the central concept in the youth studies field referring to the "meaning-making, narratives, cultural productions, and social engagements" of young people in relation to popular culture. Youth culture is predicated on structural transformations associated with "late capitalism" that create an age category defined by expressive consumption. A small body of research in the United States documents the emergence of social and cultural forms that are "hybrids" of ethnicity and youth popular culture. My research examines expressive repertoires or styles, especially visual signifiers or a "look", fabricated out of symbolic commodities and media imagery that rework Italian ethnicity for a collective position in the local youth scene and mainstream American society.





were historically inhibited by economic scarcity and traditional age norms. Youth aged-out to adulthood by the end of their teens which help explain formidable high-school drop out rates for local Italian Americans into the 1980s. Working class youth styles were labeled “greaser” - a taste culture that stigmatized the dirty labor of teenagers who worked on automobiles and other machines. The greasy look of lower class teenagers was assigned to ethnic minorities with ambiguous whiteness notably Italian Americans with stereotypically dark and “oily” complexions although Italian American greaser cool was appropriated by American Bandstand in late 1950s and 1960s.

Guido signals a departure from greaser in two key respects. First, there were greater opportunities for hedonistic consumption; it is the franchise of immigrant and second Italian generation youth to consume commodified leisure styles that have proliferated in American youth culture since the 1970s. Second, ethnicity was mobilized for consumption that transcended local greaser styles. An ethnic claim to cool, or prestigious cultural capital, has been contested from the outset.

A galvanizing event was the disco craze of the 1970s. An early feedback loop was evident when 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever* portrayed the vernacular disco styles of working class Italian Americans in southern Brooklyn neighborhoods like Bensonhurst with an Italian ancestry population over 100,000 in 1980. The film, in turn, supplied an origin myth for a critical mass of young people that had acquired the leisure and the discretionary income to cultivate a style of consumption based on clubbing.

Popular culture provides “a free space for the imagination - an area liberated from old restraints and repressions, a place where desire did not have to be justified and explained”. Disco promised a more sweeping social transformation than “greaser”. The intense sensuality of club culture offered symbolic escape from lower class status and a negatively privileged ethnicity through the “work” of leisure and the youthful body. It became the dominant style of the city’s Italian American neighborhoods by the 1980s. Italian ethnicity invoked a franchise on electronic dance music like freestyle and house. An ethnic niche was delineated by Italian American DJs, producers, and club owners that imprinted on the local dance music station [WKUT](#) [6], “The Beat of New York”.

While an “underground” club culture aesthetic offer youth an opportunity to “escape class” local Italian American youth consumed mass commercial culture to escape to a higher class. Moreover, this was in the name of ethnicity which suggests that they didn’t want to become somebody else but become an Italian American who was a somebody. The symbolic work of blending youth style and ethnic identity may be possible because “traditional resources” and “inherited meanings” have “lost their legitimacy for a good proportion of young people”. However, a subcultural ideology has professed commitment to a traditional ethnic culture compartmentalized offstage in family settings which could be reconciled with style. It is also possible that club culture excess was moderated by clubbing with relatives and making ethnic peers “cugines”.

Identifying youth style with ethnicity was an extension of the way Italian Americans positioned themselves in the city. A style cultivated in local Italian neighborhoods set youth apart when they arrived en masse in the club culture scene. It drew boundaries with core constituencies defined by race and class; to that extent, consumption style expressed positioning in status hierarchies in the city and American society. Italian ethnicity managed a relationship with Black and Latino youth who were turf rivals but also formidable influences in dance club culture, making it possible to selectively appropriate their styles without surrendering racial claims. An Italian youth identity was also transacted with club culture elites. While Italian American youth used ethnicity to express cultural difference, the possibility of becoming somebody else was checked by the arbiters of cool in Manhattan clubs like Studio 54 and Limelight. Guido labeled the “bridge and tunnel” style of upstart Italian Americans; thus, the invasion of “tacky shirtless Guidos jumping around pumping their fists” portended the defeat of underground cool at [Exit](#) [7] in 2002 (a post on [Clubplanet](#) [8] message board July 11 and accessed January 22, 2002). Club culture identity politics seem to be involved in naming Gino in Toronto; the Hamptons nightlife scene has recently gestated the name Joey suggesting a second generation synonym for Guido.

The name cugine was prevalent through the 1980s and was interchangeable with Guido. Cugine is the Italian word for cousin and expresses a fictional kinship within the youth style community as a form of ethnic solidarity. It is plausible that Guido may have named the style of “off the boat” Italian



males inside the ethnic boundary, reflecting the status politics of the immigrant queue. However, a synonymous relationship suggests that invidious distinctions inside the ethnic boundary effectively disappeared. It is further possible that identifying with Guido was a way of talking back to or opposing club culture stigma and that this was bound up with the accumulation of ethnic capital for youth culture claims more generally. An ethnography of a chat room scene established by and for subcultural youth that I conducted in 2000 and 2001 found the use of historic slurs of guinea and wop alongside Guido. Rhetorical strategies manipulated symbols of “inferior status and outsidership” into badges of ethnic authenticity that were treated as youth culture capital. At this point, Guido becomes a symbolic reversal like “nigga” that distills a quintessential ethnicity and usage warrants a careful determination of insider status.

Guido is an identity option when certain symbolic repertoires are in evidence - a look, a sound, and an attitude read by those who are literate in local youth culture codes. It is the outcome of a particular youth agency and it is recognized as self-authored; collective agency was asserted in the song “Guido Rap” recorded by a local Italian American DJ c.1987 and distributed [in subcultural circles](#) [9]. It is a “mix and match” style, what the cultural studies approach refers to as a “bricolage” of symbols. Appropriation is unified by ethnicity and meaningful within a local youth style tradition. This accounts for the survival of greaser elements like slicked-backed hair and sleeveless undershirts and themes like masculine aggression which have been increasingly stylized by the “all-consuming project” of bodily display - “looking ripped” as an outcome of particular leisure routines (the look of a somebody without a typical working class Italian American body). Stylized masculinity is a check on repertoires associated with femininity and gay fashion trends like sculpted eyebrows and even dancing; the signature “fist pump” dance style is a masculinist street culture gesture.

Identity choices are made in social contexts. The chat room that I studied revealed a marked ambivalence about Guido as an identity symbol. While Guido was an option for individual and group identity, it was not a successful strategy for attracting youth to a room. A viable scene manipulated Italian ethnicity. Being Italian permitted a variance in style that transcended performance styles specific to Guido like fist-pumping and house music. An inclusive ethnicity facilitated cyber-networking into the metropolitan diaspora.

On the other hand, ethnicity was submerged by the organization New Jersey Guido established in 2002. A subcultural ideology elaborated on its web site “redefined Guido” as “youth, beauty, and flash”. The new style spectacle was “the crazy ass New Jersey scene” centered on clubs in certain shore towns not Bensonhurst which lost half of its Italian population between 1980 and 2000 although a line can be drawn connecting the Jersey shore to southern Brooklyn and then Staten Island which became heavily Italian American (i.e., “Staten Italy”) when the Verrazano Bridge opened in the 1960s (an iconic presence in Saturday Night Fever, the bridge was immediately dubbed “the guinea gangplank” by truckers on CB radio).

New Jersey Guido was recently renamed Night Life Society, a “Social Network for Night Life” referring to a more inclusive style. The new site has a forum for Latinos but not Italian Americans. This shift left an opening for MTV which flagrantly markets the cool of “Guido and Guidettes” at the jersey shore. It has also resuscitated the ethnic dimension. The casting call posted on the Internet profiled a club hottie who is also a “loud and proud Italian”. Symbolic identification with Italian ancestry is scripted on the show. There is a nod to a traditional family morality in awkward juxtaposition to the hook-up culture.

Why has MTV produced a youth culture reality show that showcases Guido and Italian identity? Guido offers a symbol that specifically identifies the brand; Italian ethnicity makes the brand more salient. Guido combines a commodified youth party culture with a style that has street culture roots - the element of urban authenticity that sells Black youth culture in the suburbs. Guido began selectively poaching Hip Hop before it diffused to mainstream youth. MTV exploited a connection to gangsta when it casted Guido as “the hottest pimps”. As such, Guido can appeal to a suburban youth market that crosses over to Hip Hop but not Blackness. While American Bandstand sanitized greaser in the 1960s Jersey Shore has scripted moral panic with depictions of brawling and licentious sex.

MTV is hardly the first attempt to merchandise Guido style. The reality TV show “Growing Up Gotti” portrayed Guido style but refrained from using the symbol. A designer menswear company called



Guido New York appropriated the identity symbol of a disenfranchised urban youth subculture. In one promotional image, the elevated B train tracks that run along New Utrecht Avenue and 86th Street unmistakably marks the historic Guido turf of southern Brooklyn. Other images portray tough posing males in track suits; one is leaning against a cool car while holding a baseball bat - a signifier of street culture not the sport. Designs reflected a "tough-guy sex appeal" in "marked contrast to the metro sexual ambiguity that has dominated the marketplace in recent years". Mafia masculinity was referenced when one of John Gotti's celebrity grandsons was used as a runway model for the company's 2004 line.

The merchandising of Guido has not been without contradiction and irony. Guido New York conceded that "The name 'Guido'" is an "image" or "stereotype" that "may be perceived as negative", in particular "something that is less desirable" and "less than classy". In marked contrast to FUBU, the company claimed that their designs "have re-contextualized and appropriated the word not the stereotype".

www.mtv.com/shows/truelife/series.jhtml [10]

By appropriating the stereotype MTV may be selling Guido as uncool to cool kids everywhere. The producers of the show are probably young and cool enough to be aware that Guido is widely ridiculed and vilified on Internet sites like [You Tube](#) [11] and [Urban Dictionary](#) [12] (the frequency of Italian surnames suggests another intra-group dynamic). Reality TV specializes in the depiction of taste cultures that invite the disdain of tasteful constituencies; there happens to be a subgenre just for Italian Americans in [Growing Up Gotti](#) [13], [The Real Housewives of New Jersey](#) [14] and MTV's [True Life: Staten Island](#) [15]. Nouveau riche Italian Americans are also typed in the role of conspicuous vulgar consumption in fictional narratives like [The Sopranos](#) [10] and [Married to the Mob](#), reinforcing the connection between tasteless consumption and moral and criminal deviance.

There is perhaps a clue in media depictions of arriviste Italian Americans for an interpretation of Guido. Conspicuous consumption salves a status wound caused by negatively privileged ethnicity: the collective ethnic memory of poverty, stunted formal education, dirty labor and worse. Guido is a struggle for recognition and respect by an age fraction that privileges consumption rather than formal education, reflecting class differences in an ethnic culture that continues to evolve in metropolitan New York City and throughout the Northeast.

Jersey Shore is a particular representation of Guido that has the weight of reality because it is constructed in the mass media. Ratings have established its commercial success. This has reverberated in the popular culture notably in other prestigious mass media outlets and on the Internet. The ongoing study of Guido as youth culture has to take measure of Jersey Shore's impact on the feedback loop. Guido has been solidified as a category of the media culture which can be expected to shore up identity performances in the urban style spectacle. In particular, media celebrity may have yielded highly visible style leaders who can figure in commercial endorsements for commodities appropriated by youth themselves like [Armani Exchange](#) [16] and [Ed Hardy](#) [17] tee-shirts. Celebrities can be enlisted to sell signature styles to youth who identify with the brand irrespective of the organic connections of ethnicity, class, and place.

Media recognition can nourish a second generation youth style outside ethnic neighborhood culture; the Gotti reality TV show energized a Guido scene on Long Island. The Internet, in particular, offers new opportunities to network and to stage a wider conversation about subcultural ideology that includes a welter of disparaging content. This includes the possibility of challenging the MTV brand which has already occurred on the Night Life Society site especially on the part of the founder who still regards himself as "more or less the official guido spokesperson". The welter of sites that denigrate Guido on the Internet can reinforce subcultural boundaries.

Youth may turn more to ethnicity to authenticate their cool and preserve privileged insider status as in Hip Hop. However, this is denied by a vocal anti-defamation position that reduces Guido to a category of ethnic prejudice. It is my view that this slights a vernacular Italian American culture that ironically is better defined as a challenge to generalizations and stereotypes that underpin historic ethnic slurs.



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