Let's talk about the MTV reality show “Jersey Shore”, and Guidos. Yes, I said it, Guidos, or were you so concerned with the fact that I am going to be discussing “Jersey Shore” that you failed to recognize that I just used an ethnic slur? Or maybe you were unaware of its status in the realm of offensive language because many of Italian Americans throw it around without any reservation. Many people because they are also white, use the term freely to refer to Italian-Americans, like the cast members of Jersey Shore, or other people who act, dress, and speak in such a fashion. Admittedly, there was even a time when I used the word, Guido, freely to speak of this group of people for lack of a more appropriate adjective. I justified it in the same way that some African-Americans defend their use of the “n word”, saying I was entitled because I was part of the same ethnic group.

However, I recently realized that there is something very different about the word Guido. Unlike other ethnic slurs it is not only applied to the group which was initially intended to degrade but it is further used in reference to other groups of people that fit this stereotype. There are plenty of “Guidos” of Greek, Israeli, Egyptian, Syrian and other assorted ethnicities living in the greater New York area. They dress in a specific way, spend their weekends going to the same clubs, and speak similar dialects of New Yorkese riddled with profanity. However, why have we deemed the word Guido, a term associated with Italian-Americans to be an appropriate description for them? Why is it permissible to associate any Caucasian or North African looking person who wears wife beaters, gold chains, and speaks
unintelligently as Italian-American or Guido? Nonetheless, the public continues to defend this type of behavior and many times even embraces it.

People find modern minstrel shows, like Jersey Shore, to be entertaining. They justify that the cast members are involved by free will. I use the term minstrel show because the cast members of the show are acting out preconceived stereotypes of Italian-Americans, regardless of their actual ethnic background. However, does the actors’ voluntary involvement validate Jersey Shore? It does not, and even if it did, would that excuse an institution like Franklin & Marshall College embracing it? I am referring to the theme of this year’s Spring Arts Festival. Regardless, I do not want to make a fuss about that. I am simply trying to argue my point. The image of Italian-Americans portrayed by the reality show "Jersey Shore" is offensive and inaccurate and should not be condoned by the public.

In order to properly understand the problems that this representation of Italian-Americans in the media presents, it is necessary to first define the term Italian-American. The most widely accepted definition in modern Italian-American studies is that suggested by the academic journal, *Italian Americana*: “An Italian–American resides in, or has resided in, the Americas and is one who has been raised with Italian cultural values, with an ancestor who is Italian, or if he or she is the immigrant, he/she was an Italian national. An Italian-American chooses to continue those cultural values, whether consciously or not (at times without consciously knowing it)” (*Italian Americana*). This definition includes all Italian-Americans who choose to identify as such. There are certain common threads that exist among most people who fit into this definition: a shared cuisine, similar traditions, a
memory of the “old country” (even though that memory is more often myth than anything else), and a set of common values; emphasis on the family, loyalty and self-sacrifice. This is where the commonalities end. Interestingly enough, one can distinguish groups of Italian-Americans based on how they react to the term Guido. There are three specific subgroups: those who choose identify with the word, those who detest it, and those who have no collective memory of it.

The first two subgroups are associated with the earlier waves of immigration from Italy that took place between the late 1800’s and the late 1950’s. These immigrants mostly came from southern Italy and their descendants comprise the largest percentage of Italian-Americans today. It was during this era of immigration that several pejorative terms for Italian-Americans developed: Guido, guinea, Wop and goombah, to name a few. The latter three of these will send any Italian-American (who is familiar with them) into a fit of rage. These words sit in the pantheon of the most offensive language. Regardless of the consensus concerning the offensiveness of these expressions, the evolution of the term Guido has set the two groups apart, specifically among the Italian-Americans born in the last few decades.

The first of these two populations is comprised of those who choose to embrace the term. Professor Donald Tricarico, a professor of sociology at Queensborough College was quoted in the New York Times explaining the sentiments held by some empathizers of this persuasion: “Young Italian-Americans, he said, did what other immigrant groups before have done: take a symbol of derision, own it and redefine it their own way. Young African-Americans did that
with the “n word”, he added, much to the consternation of their elders” (Tricarico in the New York Times 2). Furthermore, a twenty-nine year old male who auditioned for “Jersey Shore” defined Guido as: “Guido refers to a culture of family, food, wine, cigars, coffee, gold chains, Cadillacs and a dialect that gives “fuhgeddaboudit” some panache” (New York Times 3). Although the Italian-Americans pertaining to this subgroup would agree with this explanation and agree with Dr. Tricarico’s defense of the use of Guido; many would not.

The second category of Italian-Americans would dismiss the first as low class, distasteful and Mafiosi. This group wants nothing more than to distance the Italian-American image from the Mafia stereotype. They often look toward modern Italy as a standard for cultural enrichment and they expound, with great pride, that they do not fit into the self-proclaimed Guido crowd. Many times the younger generations of this group will use Guido to pejoratively refer to the first set of Italian-Americans, despite the discouragement of their elders. People of this group are the accomplished Italian-American: the Noble Prize winners, doctors, lawyers and college professors. However, this is not to suggest that there are not some accomplished individuals who might fit into the first category. This group also represents the majority in large Italian-American organizations such as the National-Italian American Federation (NIAF) and the Order of the Sons of Italy in America.

The third group comes from a completely different perspective. These Italian-Americans are the more recent immigrants and therefore they have no collective memory of much of the ethnicity-politics of their compatriots. They
identify more readily with modern Italy and its culture, which is unique from its Italian-American counterpart. Despite this population's lack of a collective memory regarding the word Guido, they tend to favor the argument of those who detest the word. Even groups that are directly related to Italy, such as the Consulate General of Italy in New York City, have protested “Jersey Shore” along with NIAF and the Order of the Sons of Italy in America.

Understanding this division, it is now easier to examine the term Guido. As briefly mentioned earlier most ethnic slurs only apply to people of a specific ethnicity. However, Guido, which historically refers to Italian-Americans, and is used in a self-identifying manner by some, has also become a word used to describe people of other ethnicities. When the term is applied to other ethnicities, it is at times not done by members of the Italian-American community. In addition, the word is usually applied in a pejorative manner. When this is not a case, people employ it to describe a population who exhibit undesirable characteristics. For example, most of you would not say, “my best friend is a Guido”, in order to describe your friend’s Italian-American heritage. Thus, the term becomes more dangerous because it cements a life style type to an ethnic group’s identity.

Let us consider for a moment the use of Guido in grammar. “The Guidos” used with a definite article in the plural specifically referred to Italian-Americans. This use has more recently been replace with the use of a generalized noun that lacks an article “Guidos”, this term may or may not refer to Italian-Americans. Finally, the use of the indefinite article also leaves room for ambiguity in modern speech, in phrases such as, “he is a Guido”. Thus this application of the word leaves
it unclear as to whether the speakers is referring to an Italian-American or to a specific negatively viewed social stereotype.

I would like to make a disclaimer at this point. Upon completing this paper I performed a Google search determine if someone else had previously written about this concept. I found that people had, but it did not appear to have a specific origin nor could I find a scholarly source to cite. Therefore, although I feel like I should be citing someone, I am not exactly sure whom. Returning to the topic of “Jersey Shore”, the acting out of this Guido persona is akin to the black minstrel shows of our nations past, in which Caucasians and some African-Americans would dress in a stereotypical African-American fashion for the entertainment of an audience. The actors would play out a series of grossly exaggerated personalities. The cast of Jersey Shore engages in similar behavior, some of them not even being of Italian-American descent! They also role play specific characters, the bimbo, the gym buff, the thug, the mafia princess, with a peppering of over-sexed, violent, alcoholics. Upon performing such roles and embracing an identity that they call Guido, not only do they make light of the negative stereotypes that exist but they also make cheapen the sharpness of an ethnic slur that was once used to oppress and offend.

Many people may see this view as dramatic or lacking validity because of Italian-Americans’ European descent and that people can choose to identify with this ethnicity. However, the same is true of Ashkenazi Jewish people in the United States. Although being Italian-American is not a religion, both groups have the option to identify as such or not, based on personal conviction. Nobody is going to be able to look at every Jewish person and Italian-American and be able to identify
him/her based on physical features. Therefore saying that discrimination against Italian-Americans could be easily avoided is no different than stating the same about anti-Semitism in the United States. It is true, it could be almost completely evaded, if people were willing to renounce their personal convictions about their identities and blend in as “just white”. However, no human should be required to do that.

Additionally, many people of this current generation would choose to dismiss the idea of discrimination as it pertains to Italian-Americans, deeming it minor or inferior to other acts of discrimination. However, a young girl being forbidden to join the swim team because her Irish-American coach did not want a greasy Sicilian in the pool in the 1930’s or a man being forbidden by his mother to marry the woman of his choice because she was Italian-American in the 1970’s or a middle-aged woman having to listen to one of her close friends talk about the fact that she did not choose to associate with Italian-Americans because they were Mafiosi, hardly seem like insignificant acts of discrimination. In addition, the latter of these events took place just a little over a month ago. Therefore, one can see that this is not simply something of the past.

The image of the Mafioso Italian-American is still ever pervasive in American media. It is so present that for most people it seems difficult to think of a cinematographic depiction of Italian-Americans that does not fit into that mold; with Moonstruck being the obvious exception. We still live in a culture that deems “The Sopranos” and “Jersey Shore” to be entertaining, despite the outcry of organizations like NIAF and the Order of the Sons of Italy who denounced the use of the word Guido and the image associated with it. In addition to these focus groups, Italian-
American academics have spoken out against the use of this word. Although, many people remain unaware of its negativity or they dismiss such arguments as overly dramatic, if Maya Angelou or the NAACP were to protest a term used for African-Americans the general educated public would take it seriously. Since “Jersey Shore” has become popular, the term Guido has become increasingly acceptable among educated non Italian-Americans. For example, the word is used in daily conversation by many on the Franklin and Marshall campus to discuss the events of the Jersey Shore. Even though, this most likely stems from ignorance, we as scholars and thinkers should not use such language.

In summation, the public should not promote Jersey Shore and other such representations of Italian-Americans in the media that encourage the Guido stereotype. I would now like to conclude with several questions to open up to the Junto Society. Although my paper expresses a strong opinion, I would like to emphasize that this is a safe space in which all ideas and opinions are welcome. Therefore, the questions are: Is Jersey Shore damaging to the image of Italian-Americans or is it in fact just harmless comedy? Do people take its content and stereotypes seriously? Or do they simply dismiss them as overdramatic fiction? Finally, how do you view the depiction of Italian-Americans in cinema and television?
Works Cited

Cohen, Patricia. "Discussing That Word That Prompts Either a Fist Pump or a Scowl."


