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Being Italian and Female:
Consumption Experiences and the Identities of Immigrant Women

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The bulk of sociological research on immigrants and assimilation has been informed by a male and economic perspective. The research focus is usually centered on men who are the first to migrate from the old countries, the difficulties they faced working and surviving in the United States, and the problems associated with making enough to send for their families. Immigrant women are often unflatteringly portrayed in subordinate roles to the male heads of households (e.g. Monzel 1993), and stereotyped as unskilled and illiterate (e.g. Boyd 1992).

This paper aims to extend the current literature on the experiences of immigrant women by presenting a feminized view of assimilation and cultural adaptation (e.g. Weatherford 1986), and highlighting the active participation of immigrant women in these adjustment processes. Rather than straightforward assimilation where immigrant cultures are subsumed by the dominant culture of the host society, most immigrant communities have managed to maintain certain aspects of their ethnic traditions (and possibly invent new traditions as well). This form of ethnic resilience was an important aspect of immigrant experience and proved to be a source of solidarity and support for immigrant communities. In particular, the prominent role of women in preserving the ethnic community cannot be undermined (Leonard 1993). More importantly, there are many symbolic consumption choices and practices involved in the shaping of ethnic and feminine identities that have not been fully explored in the consumer behavior literature. The data presented in this paper illuminates this important research issue.

To explore the consumption experiences of immigrant women, I used multiple data sources and methods to study a group of Italian immigrant women in a Midwestern city of the United States. Using in-depth interviews, I asked participants to share their experiences as immigrant women to the United States. I focused on what it meant to them to be both "foreign" (i.e. Italian) and female. In studying how ethnic and feminine identities were shaped, two specific arenas were examined: (a) the home/family and (b) the ethnic community. In the first arena of home, I interviewed the women about consumption practices, including those pertaining to food, dress, festive occasions, religious observances, music, dance etc. These women were also encouraged to share their stories about symbolically-charged possessions such as important ethnic and religious objects, photographs etc. (Joy et al 1995).

In the second arena of community, through archival research and in-depth interviews, I examined the formation and evolution of an ethnic-based organization, the Italian Women's Club; and the involvement of Italian women with its various programs. Several authors have highlighted the important role of women-initiated and -run organizations that help immigrant women adjust to life in unfamiliar and sometimes hostile cultural contexts. These organizations help provide much-needed information (e.g. for jobs) and training for new skills (e.g. language), and also re-establish networks of friendship and support (Agnew...
More importantly, I explored how these organizations serve as vehicles for women to participate in activities designed to celebrate Italian-ness (e.g. Festa Italia, Columbus Day), and how they expressed their heritage in creative and dramatic ways (e.g. through cookbooks and plays).

In summary, the narratives woven by these Italian women demonstrate the resistance of Italian women to stereotyped images of immigrant women as docile and lacking in initiative. In particular, the stories they tell point to a complex system of meanings related to "being Italian" and "being female", and the intricacies involved in negotiating their unique ethnic and feminine identities in both individual and communal contexts.